1
37th C.M.B.
HEAVY OBJECT
After all, war did not cease. But there was a change.
"Object", the super - gigantic weapon -
this changed everything of war.
ヘヴィーオブジェクト

Novel Illustrations

Chapter 1

Part 1

It was an early summer night in June that smelled of exhaust.

A shaking military truck passed through a gate and entered a port.

The back of the truck was crammed full of thirty to forty Legitimacy Kingdom soldiers who were known to look “at least more gentlemanly than muddy potatoes”.

As usual, a certain two idiots were among them: Quenser Barbotage and Heivia Winchell.

“They say chicken is healthier than beef or pork, but that’s a lie. Boom! I got a weird marker on my health examination, goddammiiiiiiiiiiit!!”

“That’s because you were acting like the people who drink light mayonnaise straight from the bottle. You ate way too much of it just because it’s supposed to be good for you. How much did you even eat during our week of leave?”

“Shut up. And for that matter, what did you do?”

“Returned home to my safe country. Oh, but it was the worst. They were having a strike at my school. The teachers and students were taking control of the school building back and forth from each other and homemade laser cannons and railguns were being shot all over the place, so it was a bit of an adventure.”

“You’re the kind of guy that never takes a break from work, aren’t you?”

“During it all, I ran across a girl who was grazed by an attack so perfectly it only tore off her clothes, I had to escape an explosion by jumping out a window while princess carrying a girl, and I had to hide under an upperclassman’s long skirt to escape the enemy. It was just awful. I don’t care whether it’s a battlefield country or a safe country. I just want peace.”

“Why the hell didn’t you call me, you idiot!? Is this what you call an age of plenty!?”

When Heivia started grabbing at his awful friend, the other soldiers grabbed the rich noble boy’s collar and beat him up. None of them wanted anyone causing trouble when they were all crammed into the back of the truck. Their own actions were an exception, of course.

After they had taught him some manners, they released Heivia like they were throwing out an old sack.

“Bh…bffhh… I just remembered how things work in the army.”

“More importantly, look over there, Heivia. It’s the Princess. The Baby Magnum’s already arrived at the military port.”

“More importantly? You have issues too.”

The idiot’s complaints did not matter to Quenser whose eyes were already sparkling as he poked his head out from the back of the truck’s canopy.

This was a vast gray land. Not even the mountainous piles of containers could hide the colossal weapon that could not be destroyed even with a nuke. It was over fifty meters tall, it had seven main cannons attached to its spherical main body, it had one hundred other cannons covering the surface of the sphere, and it used a reverse Y-shaped static electricity propulsion device.

It was the Baby Magnum, a First Generation Object of the Legitimacy Kingdom.

“That giant thing really is amazing!! I wonder if it’s having the naval floats attached right now. I’d never get to see a treasure trove like that if I holed up in a safe country school like a good little boy. Damn, I bet there’s a ton I could learn if I saw it up close, but those containers down below are in the way!”

“Ahh, ahh. I’m glad to see you’re the same pervert you always were, Mr. Student. Why are you eyeing a hunk of steel like it’s the women’s bath?”

Meanwhile, the truck circled around the large grounds and stopped near the barracks. The soldiers stepped down to the asphalt of the military port while carrying synthetic material bags that looked like small sandbags. They looked exhausted because they had all started at different parts of the globe and changed transportation methods several times before arriving at this relay point.

Frolaytia Capistrano, their busty, silver-haired commander, was leaning against the front of the barracks with a long, narrow kiseru in her hand.

Heivia frowned.

“Why is the great major bothering to welcome us muddy potatoes? Heh heh. Could you not wait to see me (and maybe do even more), my kitten?”

“You’ve gotten fat.”

“Ghhh!! That hurts more than I thought when a girl says it!!”

“The inside is a no smoking zone. A strict glasses-wearing class rep type is complaining about everything in there. I do have to wonder why the current commander of the base has to be driven out, though.”

“It’s been a while, Frolaytia. I brought you a souvenir. There’s a Wagashi shop near my home, so I got you something called Dorayaki. They apparently have custard and blueberry inside.”

This greeting she obediently accepted and Quenser handed her the somewhat mistaken Island Nation treats.

“How’s the Princess doing?”

“Let me ask you something: Do you think the Pilot Elite gets any real time off? She’s been holed up in the cockpit this whole time. In a way, she’s been enjoying the ultimate shut-in life.”

“Oh, damn! What a waste! If I could’ve done that, I would’ve learned so much!!”

“Even if you don’t really need anything, try calling her,” said Frolaytia with a smile on her face and sweet smoke surrounding her. “She hasn’t had anything to do for the last few days, so she might let some technical information slip if you prod her a little.”

“We can see that more than enough once we’re out on the battlefield! More importantly, we need to say a tearful goodbye to proper food, proper entertainment, and proper girls!!”

“(And now Heivia has crushed any chance he had with the Princess while also creating a small grudge.)”

Frolaytia adjusted the kiseru in her mouth and prayed for his happiness in the afterlife. When Objects ruled the battlefield, getting on the bad side of the Pilot Elite was an unimaginably bad idea. He might as well have already had vultures circling overhead.

Meanwhile, Quenser showed no sign of bringing the conversation back on track. In fact, he too rushed away from his own chance with the Princess.

“More importantly, where’s the battlefield this time?”

“More importantly? …No, never mind. But if you’re going to get yourselves killed by a ‘misfire’ from an upset Princess, leave the rest of us out of it.”

“?”

Frolaytia winked while scratching at her silver-haired head.

“It’s in Africa. The Antsiranana District to be exact. It’s commonly known as Experimental Battlefield Madagascar.”

Part 2

The Antsiranana District was a battlefield country.

It was mainly composed of a giant island located along the eastern coast of Africa and it was even larger than Great Britain. It had no official affiliation, so it was a “hot potato” location that the Legitimacy Kingdom, Information Alliance, Capitalist Corporations, and Faith Organization ruthlessly fought over. However, the Faith Organization was currently making its presence known there. The area had once been known for its unique and isolated ecosystem that made it a treasure trove of animals such as the lemur, the Verreaux's sifaka, and the ground rollers, but it had recently become known as something slightly different: a treasure trove for the biological resources business.

“Welcome to Experimental Battlefield Madagascar.”

Heivia spoke in a somewhat muffled voice as he hid inside the dark jungle.

“This is as insane as always. We’re in Africa! Home of the world’s most sweltering nights! So why are we covered in special suits while carrying around these seven spy tools!? We’re covered from head to toe!!”

However, his voice was not traveling by vibrating the air. It was picked up by a microphone inside his helmet and sent by radio even though the two of them were always close enough to literally kick each other’s ass.

“We have no choice. The Object this time apparently detects people from the noise. It can locate us not just from our voices and breathing, but from the scraping of our joints and cartilage too. These are walking rubber soundproofed rooms. I agree they aren’t a lot of fun. They feel like the suits meant to protect people from viruses.”

“And they can still hear us stepping on the grass.”

“This is the jungle, so there are tons of animals stepping all over the grass. We just have to make sure none of our sounds are noticeably human.”

“Whatever the reason, I feel like I’m being forced to do judo in nothing but a raincoat. I’m not going to be absolutely covered in athlete’s foot tomorrow, am I?”

“Maybe if you didn’t talk so much and could fart a little more elegantly, we wouldn’t need these soundproofed suits.”

Something flashed inside the suit’s visor. It was a slimy green light, much like glow-in-the-dark paint.

In the lead, Heivia raised his hand and formed a fist.

“Stop, stop! Here it comes!!”

A single tone seemed to continue forever in every direction. Quenser and Heivia pressed their backs against a thick tree trunk or dove into a depression in the ground and then froze in place as if playing Red Light, Green Light. They completely froze. They literally did not move a single fingertip.

Finally, Quenser slowly turned his head and spoke inside the jungle.

“Did we…avoid detection?”

“If they’d noticed, the Object would’ve fired a shell. I don’t see how sonar detection could work very well in this thick jungle, so we can only pray I’m right and keep going.”

Heivia’s gulp reached Quenser over the radio.

“Of course, this won’t be all the Faith Organization is doing. They’ve set up parabolic antennae all over the place and the patrols will be carrying mics. Just don’t make any noise. Don’t step on any sticks, don’t touch any leaves, don’t splash any mud, and don’t mess with any garter belts someone took off and accidentally left behind. Let’s go.”

“I’m most worried about that last one.”

Quenser was a student without any real training, so he could only follow Heivia who at least pretended to know what he was doing.

After moving a bit further, Heivia came to a stop again.

Quenser crouched down meaninglessly and asked a question while only barely hidden by the grass.

“What is it now?”

“Quiet, idiot. There’s a sentry. It’s one of those patrols I mentioned.”

The Faith Organization must have decided they did not need to worry about noise because pointing a microphone forward did indeed reveal some rustling in the darkness.

However, Quenser and Heivia did not frantically dive to the ground. The jungle provided true darkness where even the moonlight seemed like a luxury. The enemy was not going to see anything even if they strained their eyes, so it would be much more dangerous to make any noise.

The two idiots crouched down as gradually as a housewife doing yoga for a diet.

Beyond the grass, four or five soldiers passed by only a few meters ahead.

“Good, they don’t have a dog. They only have cheap night-vision goggles and microphones. We can hide. Or rather, we have to or we’re in trouble.”

“…You don’t sound too certain.”

After hearing the rustling footsteps and chatting voices fade into the distance, Quenser and Heivia began moving again.

“This really is insane. Just because our Princess’s skinny arms can’t do anything doesn’t mean you should send flesh-and-blood soldiers up against a cutting-edge Object.”

“That’s just how dangerous an enemy this one is. Instead of challenging it to a direct shootout, the higher ups want us to make a surprise attack while the enemy has their guard down.”

After a short burst of static, a transmission arrived from the Baby Magnum.

“It’s not that dangerous an enemy.”

“Then can I go back to bed in the barracks? Why is the infantry out on the frontlines and the Object hanging around the maintenance base? That’s completely backwards.”

“…Mhh.”

“Wait, Quenser. Please don’t say anything that’ll lose us support from the Object.”

Heivia sounded annoyed.

“What was the enemy’s strange Object called again? Doesn’t it have everything but the kitchen sink built in?”

“The Second Generation Trinity Style. Yeah, I don’t want to get into explaining this one. The list of specs goes on way too long. You just need to know that we couldn’t win in a direct battle.”

“Again, that isn’t true,” cut in the Princess. “I could totally win.”

“Yes, yes. And we’re supposed to do something about that with our seven spy tools? What the hell are they expecting from foot soldiers who are only paid 2000 euros a month!?”

“I can hear you, Heivia.”

The delinquent soldier clicked his tongue when their busty commander’s voice arrived via radio.

He gently stroked the devices attached to the back of his soundproof suit.

“I know we’re supposed to be providing laser guidance support for an ultra long range shell, but it’s over one hundred kilometers from our base to the farthest reaches of the enemy territory. Can the Princess’s shitty cannons really reach that far?”

“What did you just say, Heivia?”

The Princess’s emotional points were dropping fast, but Quenser was too focused on the technical side to notice.

“Not to worry. She’s apparently using a new type of ablative shell.”

“Abla-what?”

“Ablative shell. It’s one of the gigantic metal shells for a coilgun with a plastic coating added on.”

“Like added chocolate sauce to unsold cookies? What good is a little plastic!?”

“It’s the same tech used in rockets and space shuttles. When entering the atmosphere, the plastic is intentionally allowed to melt in order to absorb the heat. Simply put, it’s tech that lets the shell surpass the limits of air friction to fly really, really, really, really

far.”

“Seriously? A little plastic does all that? Won’t this completely change the Princess’s tactics?”

Frolaytia cut in over the radio to reject that idea.

“Even if it’s made from plastic, it still takes craftsmen to make, so it’s expensive and time-consuming. More importantly, it’s still at the experimental phase and there are no facilities to mass-produce them. And the Princess has to be physically attached to a largescale external capacitor when using it, so she can’t move while preparing to fire. It also puts a large burden on her main cannons. Simply put, each shot is ridiculously expensive, so the research will probably end if it doesn’t produce any results here.”

“Wait! We’re along for the ride with a test firing!? I’m risking my life out here, you know!?”

As they spoke, the tall grass came to an end and the feel of the ground changed.

However, that was not because they had stepped on a landmine.

Looking down revealed something relatively common in rural areas.

“There are wheel tracks here…”

“Wait, wait. This is bad, Quenser!”

“?”

“We’ve stepped out onto one of their patrol routes. And wouldn’t you know it? The pumpkin carriage is on its way! Get back into the grass! Hurry!! Get your head down and don’t move!!”

Quenser could barely hear the engine, but the sight of the bright headlights squeezed at his heart. It was probably a hybrid vehicle. The two idiots slowly hid in the tall grass so as not to be found.

A four-wheel drive truck slowly drove up.

A soldier's upper body stuck out from the roof and was pointing around a device that combined a machinegun, a large light, a microphone, and some other clearly specialized equipment.

A meaningless transmission arrived from Frolaytia.

"Just to warn you, we won't support your escape if you're caught there."

"Hurry up and go, you idiots. Just go. Don't stop to take a leak. Getting pissed on here would be the worst."

"I hope they don't notice our footprints."

"Only you would make a mistake like that. …Oh, hell. That truck's stopping! It really is, dammit!!"

What looked like a miniature sun shined directly at them, so it was too bright to see anything past the grass. They heard the truck's suspension creaking and a few doors opening and closing. The enemy was clearly suspicious of the grass and sending people out to investigate.

If they did a thorough check of the grass, it was all over.

Heivia's mind turned to the suppressor-equipped handgun at his waist.

"This is awful. If we start a firefight, we'll be cut off on both sides. We'll lose our way back to the maintenance base and be stranded here."

"That just means we have to find another way."

"What? What is that you're holding there?"

"The seven spy tools."

Part 3

A shrill bell-like noise rang out.

A young Faith Organization soldier frowned as he stuck up from the four-wheel drive truck and aimed the attached machinegun into the grass. The machinegun was covered in a large light, a microphone, and other tools, but the microphone had picked up a waveform unusual for the jungle at night.

He received no reply when calling out over the radio, so it wouldn't be any of his colleagues shirking their duties for a roll in the hay.

He had followed regulations by calling in a report, followed regulations by having the truck stop, and followed regulations by asking for further investigation, but then something happened.

A loud sound of chirping bugs came from the grass he shined the light on.

However, they would never have a chance to relax if they let that surprise them. The soldiers moved with practiced ease as they used their assault rifles to part the tall grass and check through it.

"Nothing here."

"Nope, nothing."

"There are some signs of the grass being disturbed, but it was probably an animal. A gibbon or old world monkey or whatever they're called was probably eating bugs."

"They're called lemurs. You'll regret it later if you don't memorize the protected species in the manual. If you accidentally eat one in a bout of outdoorsiness, it'll cause an international incident."

The soldier on the roof doubted that could actually happen, but he was more interested in the readings on the devices than in his comrades' report.

However…

“If there was a local kid, an enemy soldier, a little gray, or whatever else hiding here, they would’ve had to run away pretty quickly and this mic would’ve picked that up.”

“If there weren’t any unusual readings, it means it wasn’t human.”

“You damn geek. You doubt us and then treat the machine like your girlfriend.”

There was a hint of venom mixed into his colleagues’ jocular tone.

Still, the soldier on the roof tilted his head.

He continued tilting it.

Part 4

“Did we lose them!?”

“At the very least, the spotlight isn’t following us.”

Quenser and Heivia spoke to each other while noisily making their way through the grass.

Yes, noisily.

There was a simple reason why they hadn’t been found despite the noticeable movement.

“I can’t believe you would do that on the fly. Picking up the sound of the crickets chirping with the mic and amplifying it with that handheld speaker is crazy!”

“Oh? Doesn’t that come with a few preset sounds?”

“Yes, but live sounds are best, Frolaytia. We just had to make sure they couldn’t hear us, so that leaves two methods: hold our breath and desperately hide all sounds we make or play some really loud sound to hide our own. That came up in the pre-mission briefing when you discussed our emergency method, right?”

“Hey, I know this isn’t something to discuss while Miss Tits is listening, but do you think she really has that set up? That would require more than a written apology, so I assumed it was one of her unfunny jokes.”

“But that would mean it’s finally my time to act,” added the Princess. “I’m itching to get started.”

“Really, we’d be in a lot of trouble if they weren’t willing to help at least that-…!? Oh, no!!”

“The light’s turning this way!!”

They quickly crouched down, but the powerful light still stopped

right on them. It had not been randomly swept over their way. Someone was focused on them specifically.

“Damn, I guess a makeshift method really isn’t going to cut it!!”

“One of them is really cautious. Heivia, we can’t start a firefight here, right?”

“That’s right. The going may be easy, but getting back would be the tricky part. We’d be isolated out here, so we need to lose them somehow!”

“Does that only leave the emergency method?”

“Are we seriously going to ask for that!?”

“I don’t have any other ideas.”

Part 5

“That damn geek. Let’s kick his ass if we don’t find anything this time!!”

“Calm down. We need some practice like this from time to time. Our skills will get rusty if we never use them, so just think of it as honing your skills.”

“Whatever’s fine, but does he have to point the light this way? The bugs are swarming us!!”

The Faith Organization soldiers complained and showed no intent to hide their voices or other noises. They effectively ruled this area, so they were confident they would maintain the upper hand no matter what happened.

They roughly made their way through the grass while pointing around the microphones attached to their assault rifles like bayonets.

“There’s something there. What is this reading?”

“You sure you’re not picking up your own breaths?”

“Doesn’t look like it. It might be a wild animal, though.”

“But it might be a human?”

“Maybe a conservation group…but maybe enemy soldiers.”

Tension ran through them.

The others all pointed their assault rifles in that same direction and detected the same unusual waveform.

And…

“?”

A shrill flute-like noise pierced the night sky.

The soldiers all looked up without thinking.

The heavens seemed to burst apart.

A heavy vibration shook their guts like the beat of a giant drum and flashes of light filled the dark sky. The Faith Organization soldiers were knocked over, but the unusual event did not end there.

It happened again and again.

It went beyond a mere one hundred or one thousand times. Tens of thousands of large flowers blossomed all over the sky as if to blow away the twinkling stars. The wild dance of light filled the night.

“What…the hell!?”

“They’re fireworks! Dammit, I’d heard a Legitimacy Kingdom Object had taken up a position at the edge of the Experimental Battlefield, but they must be having some kind of wild party!!”

Basically, fireworks had been crammed into the hundred or more cannons on the Object’s main spherical body, and then they had been scattered in every direction using the railguns and coilguns. The fireworks covered both the area around their maintenance base as well as this region of sky a few dozen kilometers away. Ten kilometers was the standard range for Object battles, but they could easily fire further when there was no need to accurately hit anything. When they grabbed their radios to report, a careless transmission with no real encryption cut in.

“Happy!! Birthday!! A salute to the Princess of Volga from the other side of the globe☆!! Yahaaaa! This beer is delicious!!”

“This is amazing! The people’s tax money is paying for all of this, you know? We’re stuffing our faces with caviar and foie gras and they’re paying! Am I dreaming!?”

“Team 1 to Team 3. We want to slip some alcohol into the glasses-wearing class rep’s drink, but we need help making sure she won’t notice when she tastes it. All volunteers reply at once. Over!”

The Faith Organization soldiers clicked their tongues or ground their teeth.

The deluge of voices made them feel silly for poking through the grass with strange bugs attacking them.

“Damn those depraved feudalists!”

“Hey, what do we do? We can’t pick up any noise around here with this racket!”

“We’ll report it and then check around for any footprints. We’ll move on after doing everything we can. Let’s go!!”

Part 6

Back in the maintenance base zone, Major Frolaytia Capistrano held her head in her hands. To contrast the festivities outside, she let out a low, wavering voice that sounded like it would curse whoever heard it.

“I’m letting them have it once they get back.”

Inside the Baby Magnum’s cockpit as it sat inside the maintenance base, the Princess gave a secret smug look after firing the fireworks every which way.

“Ahh, that felt great.”

Part 7

Quenser and Heivia were using the deluge of noise to run full speed through jungle.

The Experimental Battlefield was noisier than the climax of a small national tour, so they no longer had to worry about mere footsteps. In fact, the tens of thousands of fireworks were shaking the ground itself.

“This costs eight hundred thousand euros a minute! That busty commander is probably on the verge of passing out. Who knows what’s waiting for us once we get back to base!!”

“And even if this is a diversionary tactic, we’re sending out a wild party over an official channel. It’ll be recorded, so she’ll probably get a mark on her record for mixing business with pleasure as an officer.”

“Shut up, you two!! If you know that, then hurry it up!! You had better show some results after all this!!”

Their utterly uncaring conversation was interrupted by their desperate commander, so the world was as messed up as always. Meanwhile, Quenser and Heivia continued further and further along.

“This thing is too far away! The Trinity…what was it? Anyway, if it’d gotten closer, the course for our marathon wouldn’t have been quite this bad at least!!”

“The Trinity Style! And we can’t expect it to get any closer when it’s busy with the ‘tea-picking’.”

“You mean that new drug?”

“Yes, the one for developing Pilot Elites. I think I heard it’s related to traditional Chinese medicine.”

The method of developing Elites differed greatly from nation to

nation and army to army. The Faith Organization seemed to use drugs that were exceedingly difficult to synthesize, but an herb with almost the exact same chemical components had been discovered on Madagascar. The Faith Organization was selectively breeding the herb to the point that the chemical components in the pollen could be used practically. The project gave no thought to the biological contamination of an introduced species.

If they managed to take enough of it back with them and developed an effective cultivation method, it could affect the military power balance. Pilot Elites of course required some natural talent, a willingness to fight, and most importantly some human rights loopholes that allowed them to be treated like human experiments, but nothing good would come from allowing an enemy nation to develop them more easily.

That was why Quenser and Heivia were heading deep into enemy territory to interrupt that “tea-picking”.

The first stage of the plan was to blow away the Trinity Style in a surprise attack. Then, with the Object support gone, the Faith Organization’s plant hunters would be wiped out. Lastly, the contaminated flower garden would be eliminated.

“Generic drugs can be both good and bad. After all the drugs an Elite takes, I’ve heard the sheen of their hair and the smell of the nape of their neck changes.”

“Heivia, you really want the Princess to stomp on your balls, don’t you?”

“I didn’t say anything specific. Who knows? Maybe it makes her armpits smell like lavender.”

“I guess there’s no stopping you when getting stomped turns you on. I feel bad for the Princess.”

“Ksshh… Ahem. You’re guilty too, Quenser.”

“Why!? I was the one stopping him!!”

During their back and forth over the radio, the next problem

showed itself.

“What is it now?”

“It doesn’t look like a secret base built to hide porn magazines.”

Several square buildings made of quick-drying concrete had been built in a jungle clearing. The entire area was surrounded by a simple barricade and they could see several sentries walking around and guards up on watchtowers. There were likely more than ten times as many soldiers hanging around inside the buildings.

This was not the Object maintenance base.

Nor was it filled with attack helicopters, fighter jets, and tanks.

Most of the buildings seemed to have large metal shutters and it felt more like a giant warehouse than a fortress or stronghold. They recognized the military cases piled up out front. They were not for ammunition.

“Those are battery packs and they’re messing with parabolic mics or something here and there. This may be a power relay base for those electronics.”

“Are all these macho soldiers fighting while worriedly checking on their phone’s remaining battery? Not that we’re any better with our seven spy tools.”

Suddenly, the noisy fireworks diversion came to an end as if a power switch had been thrown.

The world was wrapped in darkness once more.

“That was the worst possible timing!! Couldn’t you give us at least ten more minutes!?”

“I want to shoot them some more too,” added the Princess.

“Heivia, don’t forget that we’re blowing eight hundred thousand euros each minute for this pointless diversionary tactic. This is the limit. You can’t pay for this with your measly paychecks.”

“You’re the one paying us, so don’t call them measly!!”

“Hey, Heivia. Do you think we can tiptoe our way through this power base?”

“We’re not using ninja skills to sneak into the magistrate’s mansion, so not a chance. All those soldiers have tons of sensors and mics. And that’s just what we can see. I don’t even want to think about how much they have where we can’t see them.”

“Then can we fall back and circle around the base?”

“That’s even less likely to work. They didn’t pick up any definitive footsteps thanks to those fireworks, but they’re still going to be on high alert. They’ll have sent out more patrols. Falling back will only send us right back to that truck.”

Moving forward and falling back would both be hell.

It was truly damned if you do and damned if you don’t.

After thinking inside his soundproofed suit, Quenser sent a suggestion over the radio.

“Heivia, I have a hypothetical for you. …If all of the power base’s sensors and mics were knocked out and only the flesh-and-blood soldiers’ senses remained, could we sneak across?”

“We might be able to manage it in this darkness, but…you’re joking, right? Are you planning to throw the breaker or something!? Do that and their entire army will notice something’s up! It’d be just like poking at the hornet’s nest!!”

“We just have to make sure they don’t notice.”

The power base had the same presence as a cliff, but Quenser casually pointed to one corner of it.

“Or more accurately, we just have to make them come up with their own ‘explanation’ when they do notice.”

“What? Be more specific, Quenser.”

“Look over there, Heivia.”

Quenser was pointing at a watchtower that gave a view of the entire power base.

A faint light shined in the darkness there.

“They must be bored, so they’re watching TV or online videos.”

“There do seem to be broadcast signals even in the jungle,” said the Princess. “They’re mostly satellite broadcasts, but there are also unauthorized signals being sent in from the sea.”

“A few of the sentries have personal radios hanging from their necks. And of course, all of the soldiers have their communicators.”

“You don’t mean…”

“It’s time for the seven spy tools, Heivia. There’s a flashlight meant to dazzle someone’s eyes, right? Hand that over. I need to mess with it. Also…yes. I need that speaker we used, plus…”

Quenser trailed off there and breathed in before continuing.

“You prepare the E-Thrower, Heivia.”

Part 8

On the modern battlefield, Objects settled everything, so infantry work was hopelessly tedious. Without anything to do, obesity truly could become a problem for an entire unit.

Restrictions on personal items were relatively lax, but did that provide a psychological oasis during the boring job or did it show just how unimportant their work was?

Regardless, while the others were complaining about the stale news provided by a recorded soccer match, one soldier's mood improved after he found a music-focused radio station.

(Boy Racer's vocals really start to shine after their second big hit. The lyrics get a lot better too. They stop talking about nonsense like love and romance.)

As he thought about that, a short burst of static ran through the radio.

"?"

He frowned and heard a low rumbling sound.

He stopped walking and looked first into the dark night sky and then to the watchtower.

He brought his military radio to his mouth.

"Hey, there wasn't a cloud in the sky before, right? There's nothing but smoke after the Legitimacy Kingdom's wild party, though."

He heard more rumbling.

It sounded like thunder despite the supposedly clear weather.

"It's that smoke's fault, dammit!" replied the watchtower. "They fired tens of thousands of those things, so the friction built up static electricity. Now, I'm getting scared. The lightning rod on top

actually works, doesn't it? If lightning strikes, it'll strike here first!!"

It happened a moment later.

Noise exploded nearby along with a flash of light that seemed to pierce into his eyes.

"Waahh!!"

After instinctually crouching down, he sensed an odd sputtering sound and the stench of burning plastic from around his neck.

"My radio… Oh, goddammit!!"

He pulled out the personal radio hanging from his neck by a strap, but once he confirmed it was completely dead, he clicked his tongue and threw it aside. He could see orange sparks in the darkness. They were scattering like willow branches from the searchlights, sensors, parabolic microphones, and all other electronics.

Doors opened and his colleagues poked their heads out to see what was going on. The piles of battery packs had burst like pinwheel fireworks, but they could not just pour a bucket of water on those. He saw a few people heading back inside to grab chemical fire extinguishers.

He spoke into his military radio.

"What was that? An electromagnetic pulse? Did the lightning cause it? …???"

He received no response.

He hit the switch a few times, but it seemed to be broken too.

Part 9

After confirming from a distance that it had worked, Quenser patted Heivia's shoulder.

"Let's head on in. You take the lead."

"That's pretty amazing. This is supposed to be a covert mission, but you upped the output of the strobe flashlight meant to dazzle people's eyes to create a huge flash of light, and then you played as loud a sound as that speaker could manage. A strict by-the-books sergeant would be hitting us about a hundred times right about now."

"Tone it down too much and they'd notice. When making it loud, you have to go all the way."

Basically, they had created a blindingly bright flash and a deafeningly loud noise to make the Faith Organization think lightning had struck nearby.

It had been a gamble whether their less-than-clever minds would link the fireworks smoke to lightning, but adding some interference into their TV and radio signals seemed to have helped there. The intermittent static seemed to have placed the idea of lightning in their heads.

And…

"That microwave weapon was surprisingly effective."

"The tech it uses isn't that different from radar. It just has a horn-shaped shield attached to give it directionality."

"I'm pretending to be a spy for my summer research project. I'm eagerly awaiting the offer for a movie adaptation."

Electromagnetic weapons may have sounded like a gadget from some kind of galactic war, but a few examples were already in use. For example, electromagnetic bombs would scatter a ton of

microwaves when they hit in order to interfere with all of the vehicles, electronics, and electromagnetic signals in the area.

Of course, if the Faith Organization's sensors and microphones were destroyed like that, they would go on high alert. The two idiots would have no chance if the entire army began a search of the entire area.

But their trick had paid off.

The enemy had decided that their equipment had all been blown away by the irregular lightning strike, so they would not suspect even the most extreme of results. They would write it all off as a natural phenomenon.

At any rate, the power base's security had been completely knocked out.

That only left the naked senses of the humans stuck in absolute darkness without even a single lightbulb. Plus, their eyes and ears had grown accustomed to the artificial light and noise. Until their eyes adjusted to the darkness, they would be unable to see beyond even a few meters away.

"If we're going to sneak through some barracks, couldn't they at least be filled with girls? C'mon, let's go and get this over with."

Heivia took the lead and Quenser uselessly followed.

Due to the trouble, more soldiers had stepped outside than usual, but that did not matter. All of them were blinded, so the two idiots could slip past without worrying about a thing. The enemy could only see a general silhouette at most, so they would not even see the colors. Standing tall and walking through may have been safer than trying to sneak around.

Or so they thought.

"Oh, no! Some of the more clever ones are pulling out their lighters!!"

"Now they're making makeshift torches. We need to get through

here as soon as we can.”

Part 10

With the security down, Quenser and Heivia managed to slip through to the other side of the Faith Organization's power base.

They looked back again and again, but no soldiers pursued them and no dogs were released. The entire ordeal seemed to have been accepted as natural.

"Looks like we made it somehow."

"More importantly, Quenser, look forward. We should be seeing it soon."

In the thick jungle, they could see fifteen meters ahead when they were lucky. As they cautiously advanced, they finally reached the farthest in area.

"There it is," said Heivia. "There it is, dammit. That's the Faith Organization's tea plantation."

The forest cleared out.

A moonlit plain was filled with small purple flowers. They had been selectively bred with the pollen of introduced species. Each time the flowers swayed in the wind, a pollen-like fine powder flew up into the air. If not for the soundproofed suits covering their heads, what aroma would they have smelled?

Soldiers with caskets on their backs were crouching down and picking the strange flowers.

The chemical properties were in the roots, not the flowers, so they were handling the petals fairly carelessly.

This was the ingredient for a new drug to develop Pilot Elites for the Faith Organization army.

And more importantly…

“Is that it?”

A giant form towered above the soldiers.

The colossal weapon was over fifty meters tall, covered in thick armor that could withstand a nuke, and equipped with one of the giant main cannons which were the only things capable of piercing the ultimate shield of Object armor. More than one hundred secondary cannons were attached all around the top and bottom of the spherical body like a crown of thorns.

Heivia rested a bazooka-like laser targeting device on his shoulder and Quenser spoke.

“That’s the Faith Organization’s Second Generation Trinity Style!!”

“Hey.”

“Its main cannon is called a laser container cannon. There are laser space elevators, right? By firing a powerful laser at the bottom of the spaceship, the air explosively expands and allows it to escape the atmosphere. This main cannon is one of those tilted on its side. It gathered attention for being filled with optical technology yet firing a metal shell. Of course, all sorts of things can be placed inside the container, like concentrated sulfuric acid, aqua regia, or liquid nitrogen! Onion armor may be called invincible, but it’s still based in hunks of steel. Also, if the container shell is removed, it can be used as a pure laser beam. Honestly, they really built something troublesome here. It’s so excit-…”

“Hey, Quenser!”

“What is it? And I was just getting into it!!”

“You don’t have to brag about the enemy’s specs! Once we lock onto it with this laser sight, the Princess lying in her beach chair one hundred kilometers away can fire her new…what is it called? Ablative shell??? Anyway, she just has to fire that and blow it up!!”

“…”

“…”

Part 11

Without really finding any kind of weakness or making any kind of miraculous recovery, a flash of light and explosive sound filled one corner of the earth.

“Peace really is the best,” said the Princess.

Part 12

“The Trinity Style’s destruction has been confirmed. Even with the laser guidance, the prototype ablative shell was a little weak. I will send the data to the electronic simulation division.”

Major Frolaytia Capistrano received a report from a communications soldier in the Legitimacy Kingdom’s maintenance base zone.

“Please do that. What is the Faith Organization doing?”

“Probably shaking in their boots as they use their radars to watch the Princess move in while ignoring their remaining infantry. Oh, their HQ just sent out the White Flag signal.”

“Understood. That brings an end to this war.”

“What should we do with the stranded Trinity Style?”

“Well… I’m sure the electronic simulation division is already licking their lips, so have them crawl over it before the Princess can attach wires to the wreckage and drag it to their base. Have them absorb as much technology as they can during that short time.”

Everything had gone as planned.

No better ending could be hoped for.

But for some reason, Frolaytia Capistrano tilted her head.

“Hmm, that wasn’t quite thrilling enough.”

“?”

Chapter 2

Part 1

It was late at night in the center of the Antsiranana District's Experimental Battlefield Madagascar.

"Nhhhhn!!"

Heivia Winchell stripped off his fully soundproofed suit as if he could not restrain himself any longer. He did it because he was afraid of getting athlete's foot across his entire body, but the night air was not as chilly or pleasant as he had expected. It was a normal hot and humid night.

He must have wanted to feel the comfortable wind as much as possible because he excitedly reached for his normal uniform as well.

Thus began the undressing scene that no one asked for.

"B-bodyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyy!!!!!! This is true freedom. I can feel the earth on my skin!!"

Even if he was trying to relax after finishing a job, he was doing the exact same thing as an old man going around at night in only a raincoat.

The sight must have been unpleasant because a transmission came in from the Princess at Mach speed.

"Heivia, that's disturbing, so stop it."

"Oh? What an innocent young lady. Are you embarrassed seeing the beautiful body of Heivia, the super smart and attractive noble? No need to be shy, little kitten. Look! This is the male body!!"

He placed his hands behind his head and took the pose of a Greek sculpture.

"Heivia, the data from an Object's cameras and sensors is stored in the black box. It can never be erased unless a high-ranking officer

requests it and the military council gives their approval. And I think anyone would be able to view it if the military court requests that it be disclosed."

"Kyaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhh

Heivia screamed like a childhood friend being peeped on in the bath.

The Princess held her head in her hands because that too was being recorded, but she decided to ignore him.

Frolaytia then gave a warning over the radio.

"Aren't you getting a little too relaxed? Even if we destroyed the Trinity Style in a single blow, the area is still crawling with Faith Organization soldiers."

"Heh. Even though we've got them all at our mercy with their Object gone? They'll know perfectly well they don't stand a chance against the Princess no matter what they try."

"And that's why they might make a desperate counterattack when you remove them from your sights. A ferocious animal acts more wildly when trembling in fear for its life than when it's capturing its prey. You shouldn't assume they'll all act logically."

"Sure, sure," said Heivia as he zipped up his pants.

Frolaytia seemed confused by the absence of the other boy who usually acted as the brakes.

"By the way, Heivia, where is Quenser?"

"Pant, pant, pant!! A cutting-edge Faith Organization Second Generation is right over there! It can't move, so I can peek up at it from below as much as I want!! W-wow! This is amazing!! I can touch it as much as I want too! I'd never get to touch even the smallest bit of this kind of classified information back in that safe country school, but there's…there's so much of iiiiiiiit!! I-it's all leaking ouuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuttttttttttttttttttttttttttt!!"

“I see. So he’s being a pervert in his own way.”

Quenser had already stripped off his own soundproofed suit and he did not react in the slightest even though a beautiful woman was insulting him. The dam in his head had already broken and chemicals were pumping out in his brain, so his eyes were glittering in the moonlight.

No hint of the previous covert mission remained as armored trucks carrying reinforcements arrived with roaring engines and flashing headlights.

Heivia took and drank from a water bottle provided by a medic mixed in with the soldiers.

“So how long does this picnic last?” he asked.

“Three hours is probably the limit.”

“Even though we won this so thoroughly? The Faith Organization may be desperate to get that wreckage back, but it’s not like their leftovers can defeat the Princess.”

“True. It would take more than a day or two to send in a replacement Object. But things are different on the other side of the globe. There’s been a lot of unnecessary tension over some unnecessary national borders. They’re using the diplomatic route to threaten us with the massive costs of another battle if we don’t return the wreckage right away.”

“Wow. I can already imagine them giving us a teary upturned look, biting their lip, and clenching their fists on their skirt.”

“So the electronic simulation division, maintenance division, and technological analysis division need to swarm that sugar cube in the little time we have! How much of that five trillion dollar treasure trove we can make off with in the next three hours is up to you!!”

“Hey, no fair!! We risked our lives to destroy the Trinity Style, but you’re letting them show up and take all the credit!? Wait, wait!!”

“Kya ha ha ha! Yahoo!!”

Quenser threw his hands in the air and took off full speed like lovers running on the beach. He had reached a level of geekdom that Heivia could not hope to follow. The armored trucks with various analysis sensors attached drove toward the Object.

Heivia was an amateur when it came to Objects.

As nothing more than a noble that wanted some honorable deeds for his record, he looked to the Object illuminated in the darkness by the large lights set up here and there.

It was a Faith Organization Second Generation and the Legitimacy Kingdom's codename for it was Trinity Style.

"It looks like a trendy lamp for a piece of imported furniture."

He was likely commenting on the bottom of the Object. It was only a static electricity propulsion device, but its shape was rather unique. Three curved parts resembling a crescent moon or the grim reaper's scythe were aligned like an Island Nation *mitsudomoe* and each part was supported separately.

"Hmm. Could that be to absorb any impacts?" speculated the Princess.

"You'd have to ask that bastard panting in excitement over there."

"Ha ha ha!! Yes! Yesss! Maybe I should take some pictures from over there too! Ahhh, yesss!! This angle is the best!!"

Various shouted comments and camera flashes could be heard and seen. Most likely, Perverted Cameraman Quenser was taking pictures with his handheld device's camera. In his head, the Object may have been anthropomorphized and wearing a slingshot.

The main cannon was on the Object's right side.

The crank-like arm was supported by two rotating axes.

Based on what the pervert had said before, the Trinity Style's main cannon fired physical shells with optical technology like a horizontal laser space elevator that launched metal containers. Of

course, explosives, liquid nitrogen, etc. could be packed inside for additional effects. In order to switch between the many different types of shells, it had a giant magazine on the left side. Like with a Gatling gun, a tunnel-like ammunition belt curved around the back of the Object and attached to the bottom of the main cannon.

But due to the direct hit from the Princess's ablative shell, the main cannon was bent and had a flower of metal blooming from within. A portion of the spherical main body was also torn away to reveal just how badly it was "out of commission".

There had been medics among the support troops in order to provide humanitarian aid to the Faith Organization soldiers that had been exposed to the shockwave on impact. The enemy had raised the White Flag and put their hands in the air, so ending the match was the gentlemanly thing to do.

"But why is this thing called the Trinity Style?"

"Thanks to some unpleasant rumors," replied Frolaytia over the radio. "The intelligence division and the electronic simulation division are constantly gathering data on enemy Objects. … However, there are a lot of mysteries surrounding the Trinity Style. Or maybe I should say nothing seems to match up between the reports that come in. The only point in common is how it searches for its target using sounds."

"What?"

"On one battlefield, it will use a laser beam main cannon, but when we challenge it on that assumption, a railgun shell will fly our way. It might be using static electricity to move now, but on the next battlefield, it will be using an air cushion. Sometimes even the overall silhouette is different. And of course, the more our predictions are wrong, the less of an advantage we have in battle. That's the biggest thing about its impressive records."

"…"

"There's even a theory that it uses different Pilot Elites for different battles. It's hard to believe, but long-distance photographs have

indeed shown different people and the tactics it uses completely change. This is unprecedented. This could destroy the idea of one Elite per Object."

A strange feeling ran down Heivia's previously elated back.

The spoiled noble hesitantly looked back to the metal corpse as Frolaytia continued.

"There are a number of theories. Maybe there are multiple Trinity Style Objects. Maybe it can take a number of attachments to share its main cannon with other models. Whatever the case, we haven't found the answer. …It really was fortunate that the Princess took it out in one shot. I just hope we can answer these questions before returning it to the Faith Organization."

That ominous atmosphere may have been why she was being so cautious and had sent the Baby Magnum in.

"Just be careful. The Pilot Elite probably hasn't escaped the Object even though they've raised the White Flag. It's probably just malfunctioning equipment, but we don't know who they are. If you assume they're some frail little thing, you might end up getting your brains blown out."

Part 2

Ominous rumors or not, Battlefield Student Quenser Barbotage still had the juices flowing through his brain.

“Uhohoi!! I see! I see!! The secret to the supports’ shock absorption isn’t a damper or suspension! It’s bearings!! Oh, hell. Why didn’t I think of something so simple!? Ohhh!! I need to take a note of this, but writing it all down’s too much of a pain!! Where’s the voice recording app!?”

Annoyed, the old maintenance lady spoke to him with a toolbox in hand.

“I do understand how exciting it is to see all this cutting-edge tech, but please try to control yourself. The rest of us don’t want people to start thinking you’re representative of all technicians. You understand, don’t you?”

“I don’t understand in the slightest! I snuck deep behind enemy lines with my heart in my throat to reach this moment! So I’m making the most of this. Whoa!! This is what cleans the terrain sensors on the supports! I love the little bits of technology hiding in the corners like this!!”

“If you get it, then out of the way, amateur. If we can’t get our scaffolding set up, we can’t check over the entire machine.”

The old lady operated her tablet and several transport helicopters cut through the night to surround the Trinity Style. Flying aircraft was a task for the suicidal in the modern age of anti-air lasers, but once they were flying around like this, it was proof that the battle was over and the enemy Object had been completely stopped. It demonstrated the same arrogance as an animal napping calmly on its back with its belly exposed. Sour looks came over the Faith Organization soldiers tied up around the area.

The transport helicopters opened their cargo doors and threw several wires down. However, they were not simply to lower people

down. The soldiers grabbed onto the spherical main body and manipulated the wires by swinging their arms. Some wrapped them around small cannons and others wrapped the wires together like a spider web or a cat's cradle.

Next, they tied sandbags to them to complete makeshift elevators. It was an extremely primitive design that lifted up the one side when the other side was dropped down.

They only had three hours, so they did not have time to put together metal scaffolding.

The old lady placed one foot on a small loop made from a knot and gave instructions via the glowing screen of her tablet.

"By the way, boy, you can't get any Object tech if you're going to cry about a fear of heights."

"Ah! No fair!! Let me on too!!"

Quenser grabbed at the wire just as a sandbag was dropped from above. The two of them were carried up to the top of the sphere quite quickly.

A man in a black assault uniform saluted the old lady at the top.

"Excellent work, Mrs. Ayami. …By the way, who is that?"

"Leave him be. He has no lifeline, so if he falls, it's his own responsibility."

"Wh-whoaaaaaa! Standing on this round body is pretty scary. I better hold onto these wires."

Some of the elevators were meant for humans and could carry several dozen kilograms while others were meant for equipment and could carry several tons. In addition to the ones dropped from above by the helicopters, the armored trucks on the ground fired their own wires up. Instead of using gunpowder, they used five meter crossbow-like devices on their roofs. They resembled the ballistae used as siege weapons since the time of the Ancient Greeks.

“That’s dangerous!! Our own people are shooting arrows up at me!?”

“This is still war. Did you think you could make a ton of money without any risk of death?”

The arrowheads did not stab into the armor that could withstand a nuke. Instead, they used chemical reactions such as aluminum or iron oxide to weld to the armor upon impact. Quenser saw flashes much like from a camera and he smelled a very unhealthy odor.

The student was losing his nerve already, but the old lady ignored him with a sigh and shouted instructions to the maintenance soldiers around her.

“We don’t have much time! Run nondestructive tests and take samples! Don’t think about stealing the technology in its entirety as that wouldn’t be possible. Focus on taking back some cheap but clearly-defined data over some vague classified information. Start by sounding it out and grabbing at the soft points for some souvenirs!!”

“Sir, yes, sir!!” energetically shouted the maintenance soldiers.

Even if they were technicians, they were still soldiers. They always had an athletic side to them.

Quenser was only a burden, so he received no orders and had nothing to do. He decided to start investigating the nearby area.

First, he moved to the omnidirectional microphone at the top of the spherical body.

“I see. They combined directional parabolic mics like a soccer ball to make it omnidirectional. I’m not sure if that counts as analog or high-tech.”

When he approached the microphone and glanced around, he quickly found the giant magazine that stored the main cannon’s container shells. It looked like a diagonal roof covering the entire left side of the Object. A closer look showed a row of long and narrow magazines sticking into it.

The Baby Magnum's cameras must have been viewing the same thing because a transmission arrived from the Princess.

"That's a drink vending machine."

"Hm? Oh, I get it."

Quenser caught on after a short delay.

"The container shells are divided up by type and the proper type is supplied on demand," explained the Princess. "Are the shells supplied in order from the top or are the entire narrow magazines pulled out?"

"It can probably work either way. But…"

From near the very top, Quenser looked to the back of the Object. He could see the thick tunnel-like ammunition belt connecting to the bottom of the main cannon on the right.

"Those heavy shells have to slide a few dozen meters in the middle of a high-speed Object battle, but wouldn't that create a time lag? It doesn't always use the same type of shell, so they can't be stored in the belt like with a Gatling gun."

"Most likely, it uses an air conveyer."

"That thing used to sort postcards? But those container shells have got to weigh several tons."

"Oh? But the vacuum pumps for wind tunnel experiments can create Mach 7 winds."

"…"

She was talking about a world that defied imagination.

That alone sounded like a deadly weapon to a flesh-and-blood human.

He pulled himself together and looked in a different direction.

The main cannon that used a laser space elevator was located on the right side of the Object.

“Are you interested in that?” asked the Princess.

“Of course I am. The reactor, the main cannon, and the propulsion device are the standards. Although…”

He trailed off.

As previously stated, the Trinity Style’s laser space elevator main cannon had taken a direct hit from the Baby Magnum’s ablative shell, so it had bent and had a metal flower blooming from within.

“It looks like a shortcake some hysterical person threw against the wall. Well, I guess there’s still a chance I can steal the pastry chef’s recipe by tasting it.”

“…Well excuse me for being so rude.”

“Huh? Why are you in such a bad mood all of sudden?”

He was hesitant to touch the jagged edges and it was also sizzling from the residual heat. For the time being, he aimed his handheld device’s lens and snapped a few pictures. It was smashed to pieces, but he decided to view this as a chance to see the internal parts that would normally not be visible. It also revealed their damage control structure. How did one have to hit it to crush it and how had they intended to divert the damage? That was valuable information too. He doubted the Princess would smash her own machine just because he told her he wanted to see this.

“?”

But then…

“What is it, Quenser?”

“Well…what is that?”

He sounded puzzled as he peered inside the destroyed cannon through the giant flower.

A brick-sized mass was caught inside the barrel. It had tires with countless small suction cups, so it was probably some kind of work robot.

“Is it a cleaning robot for the inside of an air conditioner? But…”

He took a picture while frowning.

There was a depression inside the barrel, almost like a piece of a jigsaw puzzle was missing.

(Could it be…? But surely they wouldn’t go that far.)

His mind began racing, but…

“Hey, I know you’re having the time of your life here, but have you managed to cool your head yet?”

A voice from behind snapped him out of his thoughts.

He turned around and found an exasperated noble boy.

“Huh? Heivia, why are you up here too?”

“It’s simple. First, since they have so little time, the old lady insisted I look after you to make sure you don’t get in the way of their work.”

Then that awful friend pointed over his shoulder with his thumb.

“But second, it looks like they’re going to force the cockpit hatch open, so all those technicians want someone who knows how to fight. Come with me and you can get the first shot at the piloting system and the Elite. What’ll it be, pervert?”

“I’ll go, I’ll go! Of course I’ll go!!”

“I see you’re too worked up to deny the pervert part,” added the Princess.

He walked across the spherical surface with Heivia to reach the back of the machine. Several maintenance soldiers were already

gathered there and they were using a metal mask and a welding torch.

Quenser and Heivia spoke to the old lady who was waiting for them to finish.

“What’s this about?”

“Objects can withstand a nuke, right? Can a welding torch really get it open?”

“Not normally, no. But we found an external ejection device for when the Elite loses consciousness. …In fact, it’s a lot like the kind the Legitimacy Kingdom uses. As a defector, I’m not one to talk, but Frolaytia’s probably got her head in her hands over this information leak.”

Still, that had given them a way in.

Stolen technology was both good and bad. If one stole enemy technology and used it “as-is”, it was just like heading onto the battlefield with a glow-in-the-dark arrow pointing to your weakness.

A young maintenance soldier removed his metal mask and faced the old lady.

“It looks like it’ll work. Who’s going in?”

“Thanks for volunteering, youngsters. Now, go get yourselves some valuable life experience.”

She shoved on Quenser and Heivia’s backs, forcing them into the open tunnel.

“Wow. Are you sure you should be giving me a present when it isn’t even my birthday or Christmas?”

“I’m impressed. I really don’t think that was sarcasm.”

The old lady gave them one last instruction.

“This is already over. Avoid a firefight and do your best to get the Pilot Elite to surrender.”

“Is that because you don’t want bullets flying near the sensitive cockpit and reactor?”

“I want to hear some things from the Elite. …Let’s leave it at that.”

“Roger that,” casually replied Heivia.

The two of them did not hesitate to slip inside the Trinity Style.

Part 3

The inside was a lot like a slide made from a two meter tube. The only strange part was how it did not take the shortest route like in the Princess's Baby Magnum. Instead, it took a large curve like a highway off-ramp. It seemed inefficient, but there may have been some design reason for it.

They reached the deepest portion.

There were no lights, so they only had Quenser's flashlight and the light on Heivia's rifle.

There seemed to have been seventy barriers in total, but only the final one was still closed. The Elite may have locked it from inside. However, only the outside needed to withstand a nuke. Heivia fired his assault rifle at the important points, kicked down the door with the sole of his military boot, and stuck the rifle barrel inside.

"Freeze!! …Huh?"

It was a two meter wide cylindrical space. The front was covered in large monitors, but they were dark. There was a single chair in the center, but there were far fewer control columns and buttons than in the Princess's cockpit. Instead, there was a single cable curled up on the floor. It also contained a mini-fridge and microwave oven just like the Baby Magnum. However, this one also had a travel pillow, a bottle of aromatic oil, a blanket, and other goods. The Elite seemed to be picky about getting some quality shut-eye.

But that was all.

The two of them were met with the stagnant atmosphere of a school at night.

"Hey, where'd they go?" Heivia asked a ridiculous question. "Where'd the Pilot Elite go!? This was supposed to be the world's most solid sealed room!!"

"…"

Quenser peeked inside the cockpit and carefully tapped around the walls and floor while thinking. However, he did not find any obvious seams or handles.

"Hold on. This isn't some ninja mansion. I doubt there are any hidden doors."

"If it wasn't here, it must've been in the tunnel on the way."

They continued the search after borrowing some sodas and ice cream from the government-issued fridge. They checked through the upwards-sloping tunnel with their lights on and soon found it.

Quenser brought his radio to his mouth.

"Old lady! We found a hatch near the cockpit that's probably a maintenance hatch for the react-…huh? Damn, are the walls too thick for the radio waves to get out!?"

"This stuff is good. They must give the Elites all the best food. So what are we gonna do, Quenser? Keep going or head back for reinforcements?"

"To be honest, I want to head back," admitted Quenser. "But you heard me say this is probably the reactor's maintenance hatch, right? We'll be in trouble if the Elite is desperate enough to mess with the reactor. If it loses control, this two hundred thousand ton mass will be blown away and only a giant crater will remain."

"Just once, can't war give us a break!?"

Heivia tossed aside the empty container of ice cream and aimed his assault rifle toward the maintenance hatch. Quenser crouched down and grabbed the hatch's handle.

"Here I go."

"One question. An Object's heart won't rupture from a 5.56mm bullet, will it?"

As they spoke, they threw the hatch open.

Immediately, gunfire burst out from within.

“Wah!”

With their plans immediately ruined, Heivia frantically pulled back while orange sparks scattered from the walls around him. Not only were bullets flying, but they were ricocheting like pinballs too.

“Close it, idiot! Close the hatch, Quenser!”

“We can’t fall back! If they go the self-destruct route, not even one of our trucks can get us to safety! Fire, fire!!”

Quenser forcibly urged Heivia on and Heivia sprayed bullets through the hatch in near desperation. Even with all its sensors, he was not going to hit anything like this.

But Quenser was not expecting him to hit.

While their opponent flinched back from Heivia’s gunfire, Quenser ducked through the hatch. Their opponent did not know he was a student and they must have been afraid of gunfire or a grenade because they moved further and further back while firing quick bursts back at the two boys.

“Just surrender!! We’ve already received the White Flag signal. You were abandoned!!”

Quenser courteously shouted into the darkness, but he of course received no response. That meant their opponent was not done fighting.

Heivia stepped through the hatch too.

“Ugh. What is this place?”

“A maintenance passageway positioned along the reactor. I doubt it was meant to be used while the reactor is active, though.”

It was a curving passageway only two meters wide. A pipe wider

than the passageway itself covered the inside of the curve. There were other pipes for power and steam positioned along the ceiling.

If Quenser was right, the entire passageway formed a donut shape. Reactors came in a variety of shapes and varieties, but the Trinity Style was likely using the kind that resembled the fusion reactors of an older age. In other words, a circular frame was surrounded by powerful magnetic lines to manage a plasma flow with such overwhelming heat it was often referred to as a small sun.

“That sounded like a submachinegun, but the whizzing of the bullets was a little too high-pitched. Those were probably bullets designed specifically for PDW use,” said Heivia. “If that’s the Elite’s hidden weapon, then there probably aren’t any spare magazines. After all, they’d take up valuable space and be less useful than a fire extinguisher. It probably has at most fifty bullets inside.”

“Meaning?”

“If they’ve got limited ammo, this can act as a barometer to how desperate they are. They’ve already fired about thirty shots, so if we don’t capture them soon, they’ll turn one of the valves in here to cause an explosion.”

In other words, their opponent had already used up half their tickets to survival. They had to be feeling tragically heroic.

“Anyway, did you see that? I only caught a glimpse of them as they vanished around the curve, but they had twintails.”

“That’s the best news I’ve heard all day. …But if it’s a guy with twintails, I’m filling them with lead.”

The passageway was donut-shaped, so following after the Elite could allow that Elite to circle around and escape out of the maintenance hatch. However, it would be too dangerous for Quenser to cut them off the other way since he had no gun.

After some thought, Quenser pulled a few pen-sized electric fuses from his waist pouch.

“Wait, are you using bombs here!? As durable as an Object may be,

there's plasma at temperatures higher than ten or even a hundred thousand degrees right next to us!"

"I'm not putting these in the Hand Axe. The fuses themselves are just like giant firecrackers, but the Elite won't be able to tell them apart from gunfire while cowering in the dark."

"Oh, I see. You're pretty bad yourself."

"I'll drive the bunny forward with some loud noises, so you circle around the other way for a surprise attack. We can only gamble that they won't try to break through in this direction."

Heivia tapped Quenser's shoulder and then vanished down the passageway.

Left alone, the boy had a simple task at hand. He only had to throw the fuses randomly down the passageway and grab his radio. He had not been able to contact the old lady, but outside and inside were different. The signal would reach things inside the same Object.

He pressed the switch with his thumb and dry explosive sounds rang out. He heard a short surprised burst of gunfire that was likely the Pilot Elite's counterattack. He seemed to have tricked them just fine. The Elite and Heivia must have run across each other on the other side of the donut because he heard an even shorter exchange of gunfire.

However…

"Shit!! Shit, shit, shit!!"

"What is it, Heivia!? Why are you coming back!?"

"That wasn't random! They were calculating out the ricochets! Oh, goddammit! I'd be dead if I hadn't fallen back!!"

"Oh, c'mon! You can't even do your job!?"

Quenser seriously considered kicking the boy back the way he had come, but then a twintailed figure appeared down the curving

passageway. When he saw the ultra-small fully-automatic firearm simplified to the point of being T-shaped, he realized he did not have time to be stupid. The two boys scrambled out into the external tunnel and shut the hatch. They heard the heavy sound of bullets slamming into the hatch behind them.

“What do we do!? Wait until they’re out of ammo!?”

“You said they probably have at most fifty shots, right? But even if we counted accurately, we’ll get our brains blown out if they happen to have fifty-one shots. And what if there are more PDWs hidden around like fire extinguishers? We’ll make our triumphant entrance once things quiet down and then be filled with holes. We can’t rely on that.”

“Then do you have some clever idea!? Or is that clever head of yours only any good at wearing stolen panties!?”

“I’ve already done it.”

“?”

“Hey, Heivia. Assault rifles and PDWs are convenient, but you don’t need anything that impressive to kill. You don’t even need a single bullet or blade. Not even poison or drugs are necessary.”

He waved his hand with a smile.

“All you need is water and air. That’s enough to get them to give up.”

Part 4

The twintailed girl was holed up in the donut-shaped reactor maintenance corridor.

She was the Trinity Style's Pilot Elite.

She gasped for breath holding a PDW simplified to the point of being T-shaped, but this was already over. She understood that, but she could not just let this happen.

She could not surrender to the Legitimacy Kingdom.

If she did that, she would *definitely* be killed.

That future appeared far too vividly in her mind.

(What should I do?)

The small elite thought deeply inside the donut-shaped passageway after driving the enemy soldiers out.

(What am I supposed to do now?)

Object reactors were generally electronically controlled. They would mechanically supply power without any input from the Pilot Elite and they could be manually controlled from the cockpit if absolutely necessary.

If the reactor was completely out of control, there were countless valves along this passageway for emergency intervention.

But that also meant she could send a stable reactor out of control and blow away everything for kilometers around.

Or she could convince the Legitimacy Kingdom she was doing so in order to get the entire unit to withdraw.

(I just have to do whatever I can.)

That may have sounded like a decent idea, but there was another important factor here.

That plan would change things too much.

Once she started, there was no turning back. If she successfully tricked the Legitimacy Kingdom into retreating, that was great, but there was nothing she could do if she failed and they remained at the maintenance hatch. And if she messed up her bluff and really

did send the reactor out of control, she would be vaporized as much as anyone else.

(Yes, that's right.)

The twintailed girl's eyes fell on the many valves lined up along the donut's inner wall. She faced them and touched one of them.

Was she really thinking logically here?

Or was that just an excuse and she really just wanted to take her enemy down with her?

(This has to be the best plan!!)

Without noticing that, she prepared to turn the valve.

But something stopped her.

"?"

Her sense of balance was suddenly thrown off.

She assumed the dizziness came from fear or anxiety. She wiped at her forehead with the back of her hand and found oddly warm sweat coating it.

No.

It was not sweat.

(What…is this?)

It hit her as soon as she asked.

"Is that what they're doing!? Dammit!!"

She let go of the valve and frantically ran over to the maintenance hatch, but it was too late. The hatch was shut from outside and someone seemed to be pressing up against it. When she realized she could not open it from within, she aimed her PDW toward the thick hatch and sprayed bullets at it in desperation.

Part 5

The two idiots desperately held the hatch closed while hearing dull sounds from within. They knew the bullets were theoretically unable to get through, but the roaring sound was enough for their balls to shrivel up.

“I messed with the steam pipe running along the ceiling,” explained Quenser. “Humans can’t live long in a high-temperature high-humidity environment. There are detailed manuals they follow when constructing tunnels or working in mines. Saunas are adjusted for safety, but you won’t last twenty minutes in an improperly maintained one.”

The gunfire soon stopped.

The Elite seemed to kick at and bang on the hatch for a while afterwards, but even that eventually ended.

They waited a few minutes after that.

True silence surrounded them as the enemy put up no resistance at all.

The two of them nodded to each other, hesitantly opened the hatch, and felt the same humid steam as when opening an Island Nation rice cooker.

Inside, they found a girl with long blonde twintails wearing a green special suit that covered her entire body.

A loose cloth was wrapped around her body over the thin, skin-tight suit. The cloth formed an X over her chest and her waist, and together they created a diamond shape. It may have pointed to some kind of doctrine or rank within the Faith Organization, but the uncultured and unintellectual idiots could only see it as an oddly-designed swimsuit for a pin-up model.

She was lying on her side like a heat stroke victim.

Her skin was flushed and her bangs were plastered to her forehead. Her entire face was red and her entire body was covered in what may have been beads of sweat or drops of water.

Quenser sighed as he looked down at her.

“Things are finally starting to get sexy around here, so it would be a waste to turn her into a corpse. Let’s take her back while she’s still alive.”

“I’ve been meaning to ask you: is that calm demeanor of yours something you buy at a store somewhere?”

Part 6

In truth, the next step was the hardest part.

After all, the Trinity Style's tunnel was a steep slope that curved around like an off-ramp. Even if girls were light, they still weighed forty to fifty kilograms, so it was the same as carrying a bag of rice. The two idiots slipped several times on the way and were very nearly forced to start again from square one.

The twintailed Elite woke up on the way, but she seemed to decide resisting was a poor plan when she had no gun and her thumbs were bound behind her back. For how much she had struggled before, she was being quite docile.

They somehow managed to arrive outside.

When the two idiots showed up absolutely soaking with sweat, the old maintenance lady gave them a puzzled look.

"It wore you out that much to catch one little rabbit?"

"Do you want to try it? I don't even remember how many times we almost died in there."

Heivia was too exhausted to say anything more.

Quenser placed his hands on the back of the twintailed girl's shoulders, but not because he was a sexually harassing lowlife. The Object's main body was a round sphere and the Elite could easily lose her balance and fall with her hands bound. And that was true of an accident or an intentional act.

"What's your name? You'll be interrogated more than enough later, but I thought I'd ask."

"Skuld. Skuld Silent-Third."

That was all the Elite girl said.

Or maybe it was all she could bear to say. Even taking into account the moonlight illumination, her skin was unnaturally pale. Quenser also felt a tremor in the shoulders he held in his hands.

She must have just been that fearful and anxious of falling into enemy hands. Unlike all the random grunts, she was the one actually participating in war and killing so many people. She may have been aware of the grudges she would have made.

However, that did not seem to be the real reason.

Skuld looked back toward Quenser and spoke in a slow, trembling voice.

“I’ll be killed. I’ll *definitely* be killed.”

“Listen. We already received the White Flag. The battle is over.”

“No.”

Skuld shook her head, but not because she could not trust Quenser and the others.

“I’ll be killed by the Norn.”

“?”

Quenser did not initially understand, but…

“I’m talking about this Object!!”

By the time he grasped what she meant, the situation was already underway.

The round Object that Quenser, Heivia, and the others stood on began to move.

The Pilot Elite was no longer onboard, it should have been empty, and it should not have been able to move, yet it was. With the simple movement of a wet dog shaking off some water, it worked at throwing off the puny humans clinging to it. No, it even swung around the helicopters and armored trucks attached by wires. It

looked like an amusement park thrill ride using centrifugal force.

There was nothing they could do.

By the time he caught on, Quenser had already been thrown out into the night sky. And he was not the only one. Heivia, the old maintenance lady, and the many other young technician soldiers joined him. They were all amusingly flailing around like awkward birds, but Quenser was no different.

A girl floated in the air nearby. Skuld had her thumbs bound behind her back, so he grabbed at her body and pulled her close.

There was nothing more to do.

The one piece of luck was just how huge the Object was. Instead of falling into the flower field directly below, they fell into a densely packed jungle a short distance away.

Narrow branches audibly broke and absorbed some of their momentum before they hit the ground.

“Gh…bah!? Aghgeh…gehah!!”

He landed on his back and had trouble breathing, but the pain told him he had not died quite yet.

Not wearing a lifeline had actually proved fortunate. Even now, some of the spider web or cat’s cradle wires remained and both equipment and personnel were being swung around like morning stars.

“Ah…ghah!! Skuld…are you…okay?”

He looked to the girl in his arms.

She would not have been able to land properly with her hands tied behind her, so Quenser may have been right to grab her. At the very least, it did not look like anything was broken.

“If you are, then explain this. What is that!? Why is the Trinity Style taking strategic action with the Pilot Elite removed!?”

Was she going to say it was AI-controlled and did not need a Pilot Elite?

That was Quenser's thought, but the answer was something else entirely.

"The Norns are the three goddesses of destiny."

"You don't mean…"

"Urd, Verdandi, and Skuld. The Norn has three Elites."

That explained things.

If the other two Elites could pilot the Object even with Skuld captured, the current situation made sense.

If the alternative was letting Skuld, who held highly classified information, fall into enemy hands, killing her here was the logical decision when the Elites were replaceable like that.

"Now I get it," said Heivia who had fallen nearby.

Could a student like Quenser get away with calling him pathetic? That awful friend was beaten up and the old maintenance lady was practically grabbing at the back of his uniform's collar to support herself.

"That busty commander was right when she said it looked like different Elites were boarding the Trinity Style. That's exactly what was happening! But who would have ever thought that three of them were controlling the thing at once!? Goddammit!!"

"That would also be why the tunnel curved like an off-ramp. The shortest route would mean the tunnels leading to the three cockpits would intersect. They had to spiral around so that wouldn't happen."

But…

"What's going to happen now that they're forcing it to move!? It was already taken out of commission by that ablative shell, right!?

It can't move right with that damage and its main cannon was blown away and turned into a flower or something. Are they really going to fight the Princess like that!?"

"You understand nothing," said Skuld harshly.

The machine she had entrusted her life to was now targeting her and she spoke in the face of that unreasonable reality.

"You understand nothing of how dreadful the Norn is."

A moment later, the most unreasonable thing of all happened.

With a blinding flash of light, the Trinity Style's supposedly destroyed main cannon fired.

Part 7

In truth, the old lady and other maintenance soldiers had found something strange while Quenser and Heivia were having their firefight with Skuld.

It was a blocky work robot the size of a brick. It had a few wheels covered in small suction cups, so it could likely move along the walls and ceiling.

Quenser had found one inside the main cannon that had opened up like a blooming flower.

He had guessed it was a maintenance device meant to clean the air conditioner or something, but the old lady and the others had a different idea.

“What is this?”

“We found a bunch underneath the armor panels. They completely covered the inside like wharf roaches. With that many, they could probably lift up and move the armor panels.”

“What about the cannons?”

“We can’t rely on the main one since it was blown to bits, but we took some samples from the smaller secondary cannons. Same with the supports. It’s like a 3D jigsaw puzzle.”

“In other words…”

They heard the sound of a bug’s jaws opening and closing.

The old lady could not tell where it was coming from, but the creaking sound came from somewhere inside the giant machine. Almost as if it was changing form like a living creature.

“This Object isn’t a solid mass of metal. Is it more like children’s building blocks? Can a group of small blocks move around to create a completely different Object?”

Part 8

After a deafening explosion and a blinding light, a few of the Baby Magnum's main cannons were torn away. The sound of blowing wind came next. It seemed to happen with a certain frequency, like someone slowly swinging a metal bat, and then something arrived.

One of the Baby Magnum's lost main cannons slammed into the jungle Quenser and the others were hiding in.

"Aaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!?"

Quenser grabbed Skuld and Heivia grabbed the old lady's hand as they took off running. They leaped into a depression in the ground and hid there just in time for the wreckage of the main cannon to pass by overhead while knocking down all the trees in the area.

But that was not the only damage.

Either the wires had snapped or the welded points had come undone because the swinging analysis equipment, armored trucks, and transport helicopters flew their way in long parabolic arcs. The analysis equipment felled countless trees, the rotors of the rapidly spinning helicopters mowed down the underbrush, and the armored trucks exploded and set the surrounding jungle ablaze.

Heivia trembled next to Quenser inside the depression.

"You're kidding! You have *got* to be kidding!! What the hell was that!? I thought the Trinity Style's main cannon had been blown away!!"

"They're called Dvergr," said Skuld in Quenser's arms. "They are the smallest unit making up our Norn. They are the dwarves that create the weapons of the gods, so there isn't just one form. The damage doesn't matter. The Norn will just take on a new form, become a new Object, and attack."

"I can't believe this," groaned Quenser. "So it only looked out of

commission after taking that ablative shell because you were playing dead!? You were waiting for us to get close so you could easily take out the Princess who was so far away!?"

"We didn't plan it out that well. Your attack really was a complete surprise. The three of us were discussing how to best turn things around and we voted two-against-one to sacrifice me."

"It doesn't really matter either way. This just means the insecticide wasn't enough to kill the roach, right!? What do we do? The disgusting thing's still alive and kicking!!"

The Princess could still move even with a few of her main cannons lost. She was moving quickly to recover from the disadvantage of taking a surprise attack head on and she fired low-stability plasma cannons in retaliation.

The Trinity Style avoided a few of them, but one clearly hit it dead on.

It should have pierced right through it, but…

"It…stopped it!? But that was definitely a clean hit!!"

The surface was a little melted and orange, but that was it. Even as Quenser shouted his question, he came up with the answer on his own.

"Don't tell me… You've got to be kidding me!! Did it take the evenly-distributed onion armor and focus it on that one point? It forced its way through using the thickness of its armor!? It can do that!?"

It no longer seemed feasible to simply blow through a single point of the armor. Unless the Princess burned through all of the tiny blocks making up the fifty meter, two hundred thousand ton mass, the Trinity Style would continue moving.

He started feeling faint from the hopelessness of the situation.

The Princess would be worn down like this. Once she was defeated, they would lose their support. And with the Trinity Style

functioning, there was a chance the surrendered Faith Organization troops would resume the fight. The situation was doubly bad as things were.

“Didn’t I tell you?” said Skuld who had her hands bound behind her back with Quenser’s arm around her shoulders.

She looked up at him from near his chest with a smile of resignation.

“I’ll be killed by the Norn. A single Elite isn’t worth all that much to the Faith Organization. They’re perfectly willing to abandon us if it means winning the battle.”

The Object was made up of tiny robots and could freely change its design.

It always used three Pilot Elites, so they did not need any unique characteristics.

It made sense from a design perspective.

The idea had been discussed in the past. With one Elite per Object, military action could be stopped by personal issues like a stomachache, a cavity, or heartbreak. Those fears were generally ignored because a single Object was more useful than one thousand normal tanks, but the Trinity Style’s unit had taken a different approach.

They had raised the value of the whole by reducing the individual value to near zero.

But…

“That’s Experimental Battlefield Madagascar for you. Everyone here is insane.”

“?”

When it came down to it, weapons development was about killing people in the most efficient and least wasteful way possible. There was no room for idealism there. The news on TV might talk about

inhumane weapons, but who would be willing to head out there wearing a suit and holding a rose in order to elegantly kill people? Only the side suffering the death bothered with those consolations.

But this was different.

This design principle was lowering the value of the lives onboard the Object and of the lives the other soldiers were trusting their own lives in. That did not sit well with Quenser who was not even a novice designer yet. No matter how much it improved the odds of victory, no matter how low it brought the costs, and no matter how much the customer would love a design like this, he felt a chill before any excitement.

"…"

The next thing he knew, he was glaring at the loathsome colossal weapon and bringing his radio to his mouth.

"Princess, I know this can't be easy, but please listen. Focus your main cannons on the front of the Trinity Style. Don't give them a chance to rest."

"They aren't giving me a chance to circle around anyway, but then what, Quenser?"

"Then…"

He paused as he stared at the monster. If the "cool weapon" he had hoped for was a soda, then this was that soda after it had gone flat.

"We'll circle behind it and destroy the damn thing."

Part 9

They left Skuld in the depression with her hands still bound behind her back.

Quenser got up and spoke to his awful friend.

“Let’s go, Heivia. Let’s end this.”

“Are you serious? We’re going to run through this catastrophe on our own two legs!? They’d better make a movie out of this!!”

Heivia tearfully complained as he ran alongside the other boy. They left the jungle and reached the plain covered in lovely flowers. The ground had been torn into here and there, leaving the dark soil exposed. There were also plenty of smashed helicopters and armored trucks lying on their sides. That was the fate of the armored weapons that had instantly welded their wires on with aluminum or iron oxide. Soldiers performing first aid were gathered behind them like bugs preparing for winter underneath a stone.

Quenser joined a group of them, tapped on the armored truck with the back of his hand and spoke to a medic wearing a military uniform and a nurse cap.

“Hey, you alive? Can anyone move? And do you know how many of these battered shields can still run?”

“I-I can share my map data with you. But what do you hope to accomplish against that monster? Everyone’s too scared to do anything.”

“You say they can’t do anything, but they’ve got two hands and two feet, right? Then you can break though their cowardice by telling them to help out if they want a new pick-up line to use at the bar!”

Another blinding light and deafening explosion illuminated and tore up the late night flower field. The giants were duking it out. The Princess was having a hard time of it in her First Generation, but

not because she could not hit her enemy. She simply could not pierce the enemy's onion armor because the pieces would gather at the predicted point of contact.

Quenser slapped the medic girl's back to cheer her up and then similarly asked for help over the radio. Meanwhile, he ran out from behind that puny shield while staying low to the ground.

Heivia looked about to die despite not having been hit by anything yet.

"What are we supposed to do!? If all of the Princess's low-stability plasma cannons can't break through, then how are we supposed to damage it from the surface!?"

"Heivia, everyone's working hard right now. At the moment, we have fewer minds than weapons. I don't know how much a student like me can manage, but we need to get our hands and feet moving!"

"I'm asking what good that will do! Outdated bullets and shells can't get through armor that can withstand a nuke!!"

"Don't be so quick to say that."

Immediately after Quenser's baffling answer, a unique sound came from the surviving armored trucks. They were attacking the Trinity Style from behind while the Princess attacked from the front. Instead of weapons using gunpowder, they were firing wires from the five meter crossbow-like devices. The violent roar sounded a lot like a thick flat spring snapping after being bent too far.

The long arrows were launched one after another, but they did not stab at their target with their weight and speed. That would only have gotten them deflected by the Object's armor. Instead, they used aluminum and iron oxide chemical reactions that created instantaneous heat of a few thousand degrees to fuse onto the armor panels.

However…

"Ahh, I knew it," lamented Heivia as he ran through the battlefield

of flashing light and explosions. “That isn’t going to stop it! The trucks are being swung around instead!!”

They could see the soldiers scrambling out and diving to the ground just before the armored trucks were pulled up into the air. They never could have reacted that quickly if they had not already been prepared to escape at a moment’s notice. None of them had thought they could win.

Except one, that is.

“That’s what I wanted.”

“What?”

“Hey, Heivia. It’s true the Trinity Style looks invincible at first glance. That fifty meter and two hundred thousand ton mass is made up of small robots that can remake the entire thing to match any conditions, environment, or enemy. It’s the ultimate Second Generation. No, since it can fight no matter the weather or environment, maybe it’s gone back to being a premium model First Generation.”

“What does it matter when we can’t beat the thing!?”

“Have you forgotten? All it’s doing is rearranging its materials. It doesn’t have a factory inside to create new blocks. It hasn’t overturned the conservation of mass.”

“If you’re actually planning to explain this, then just do it already.”

“If they’re prettying up one spot, wrinkles have to appear elsewhere. I’ll put it so simply an idiot could understand: It wants to make its armor thicker, but where is it taking those parts from? When it takes that armor away, won’t it be thinner there?”

Quenser and Heivia jumped inside an armored truck lying on its side. It could no longer drive around on its tires, but the turret-like weapon on the top still just barely moved.

“Wait, so you mean…?”

“That’s right.”

Quenser pointed at the screen and Heivia took care of the actual aiming.

Around them, several welded-on wires and their heavy trucks swung through the air before finally breaking off, flying into the distance, and stabbing into the ground. However, careful observation showed that something was different.

The wires were not snapping and the welding was not coming off.

The small robots – that were called Dvergr according to Skuld – and the armor panels were being peeled away. The Object was a two hundred thousand ton mass, but each individual robot was only the size of a brick. It was not that difficult to forcibly tear them away with the weight and centrifugal force.

This was helped by…no, caused by…

“The armor on the very back should be a lot thinner with the Princess’s main cannons hitting it on the front.”

Quenser grinned.

They had invaded Skuld’s cockpit and he had seen the off-ramp curve of the tunnel on the way there. The other hatches had likely been hidden by the robots and armor panels, but if all three cockpits were positioned at the three corners of an even triangle, then he could take a good guess where the other two were.

He made sure to point at and verbally repeat each item on the screen.

“I’ve removed the safety, the fuse is set, and the final targeting is complete. I just followed the help guide, but is that enough? Will this work, Heivia!?”

“Yeah!! But just to be sure, cover your ears and open your mouth! I’m gonna fire!!”

“Then fire right up the filthy ass inside that naked apron!!”

The armored truck shook from the blast of firing.

This scene may have been out of place in the modern age of clean wars.

It may have been no different from firing a single puny shell.

But at this moment, things were different.

An intense shaking had to have reached the cockpit. The Pilot Elite who felt protected even from a nuke would have been filled with supposedly impossible fear.

And they would have learned that they were under attack from the Princess in the front and the tanks, armored trucks, and shoulder-fired launchers from every other direction.

The Trinity Style's round armor had pieces missing like toy blocks had been removed. The contents were exposed, especially on the back.

The Dvergr could not immediately rearrange to fill the holes. If they did that, the Princess's fierce attack would break through on the front. However, leaving the holes might lead to the surrounding infantry crushing the nearly exposed cockpit.

"Hey, what do we do? It's still moving after all that. We haven't destroyed the cockpit yet! What do we do now!?"

"Wait."

If the enemy truly intended to drag this down into a drawn-out battle of possible mutual destruction, then the outcome was still a mystery. If it used its nearly one hundred cannons to slaughter all of the infantry and continued fighting the Baby Magnum despite the damage it would accumulate, it might just turn this around.

But would the Trinity Style go that far? Was it willing to accompany an outdated First Generation and a handful of infantry to the depths of hell?

The next thing they knew, the Trinity Style had stopped firing as it

took high-speed evasive actions.

A transmission was already coming in from Frolaytia.

“We’ve received the White Flag signal again. We could always destroy them since they already ignored the rules, but we don’t want to take any more damage either. Do not pursue. Wait for them to retreat.”

“We’ve won for now, but this is no time to celebrate,” said Quenser inside the overturned armored truck. “The Trinity Style can redesign itself to match the current conditions and environment. This weakness will probably be gone the next time we see it.”

Part 10

The Pilot Elite girl named Skuld got up from the depression in the ground with her hands still bound behind her back. She quietly came out from behind cover.

Her beloved Norn had left.

She felt as neglected as someone who had been left in the line of fire by a rescue helicopter. At the same time, she felt relief at the immediate threat leaving. The two conflicting feelings mixed together in her head.

She would likely be taken into Legitimacy Kingdom custody along with the other Faith Organization soldiers. In the initial discussions, the Legitimacy Kingdom had promised not to touch the scrapped Norn or its Pilot Elite, but that verbal promise would have been nullified by that second round.

Skuld was a Pilot Elite.

Her body and mind were both packed full of classified information, so the Legitimacy Kingdom would be watering at the mouth at the thought of getting their hands on her. For the same reason, the Faith Organization would want to silence her as soon as possible.

In that case, it was obvious what would happen next.

“This means war.”

The Norns were the three goddesses of destiny.

Of them, Skuld was in charge of the future and the ultimate destinations of human lives.

In other words, she gave prophecies of death.

Chapter 3

Part 1

The hellish night had come to an end.

Morning came early for the soldiers…but that did not mean they had an easy time waking up. After being woken by an explosive blast from a cheerful idiot with a trumpet, Quenser rubbed his eyes in the top bunk of a triple bunk bed crammed into the barracks and he said good morning to the large nude poster within arm's reach on the ceiling.

Unlike an officer like Frolaytia or a Pilot Elite like the Princess, the lowly soldiers and the student (who was nearly a freeloader) were crammed in together at night. The boys and girls were split up and then they had to climb into the beds stacked up almost to the ceiling. The comfort level was greater than a hammock but less than a capsule hotel.

He did not have time for a leisurely morning shower. He finished the bare minimum of preparation to make himself presentable and grabbed the day's rations from one of the boxes piled up in the mess hall. That careless setup would allow a glutton to sneak off with more than their share, but since they were flavorless and odorless lumps reminiscent of soap or an eraser, no such trouble had been reported.

This was a maintenance base zone located near the coast.

Over one hundred large military vehicles had been gathered together. Even their barracks were built on top of a giant flat vehicle with at least thirty or forty wheels.

"…"

Quenser sat on the stairs up into the vehicle and nibbled on a corner of the rations while looking like he was facing the end of the world. He then noticed Myonri, a colleague of his, sneaking around out front.

“Hey, Myonri. What are you doing out so early? …Are those blueberries?”

“Eek!?”

The girl’s shoulders jumped and she looked back while holding a basket in both arms. The basket was filled with small fruits that must have been picked just that morning because they still had thin vines and leaves attached.

“N-nothing? There certainly isn’t an alliance trying to create pastries because we’re fed up with the flavorless rations. And I’m definitely not on my way to boil these to make jam!”

“Wait! You were sneaking around selecting ingredients while some of us were running around a hellish battlefield in the middle of the night!? Inexcusable! Share some of those with me. Simply inexcusable!!”

“Wahhhh!! My share always shrinks and shrinks like this!!”

According to teary-eyed Myonri (most likely to divert the predator’s attention), there was a rather large group that took issue with the tasteless rations and a number of communities had formed there. Some would try to get salt by boiling down seawater and some would try to make margarine using the oils from plant seeds.

Not only were the completed products tasty, but they could be used to trade for other seasonings.

“Rumor has it there are hidden groups making mayonnaise or crushing grapes to make wine.”

“The depths of the Legitimacy Kingdom’s darkness know no bounds! Absolutely inexcusable!!”

“Wahh! Quit trying to distract me!!”

Quenser was not going to wait until the jam was made, so he grabbed a few of the blueberries as-is and used their perfect acidity as an accent between the flavorless bites that seemed to sap his will to live.

“There’s so much variation in individual preferences that they can’t satisfy everyone. Since they don’t want the food to affect people’s combat-readiness, they go for something everyone finds tasteless, but there’s got to be something wrong with that reasoning.”

“Ah ha ha. But taste aside, those rations are supposed to be quite useful. They’re nutritious, they preserve well, they’re portable, and so on.”

“Really? I’ve seen rumors online that they dry restaurants’ leftover rice into a powder and cook it in the used frying oil.”

“C’mon, c’mon. That can’t possibly be…wait…”

Myonri rejected the idea with a smile, but then she realized she had no basis at all for doing so. She must have sensed that staying out in the open too long would let other soldiers notice her blueberry basket and thus take everything she had collected, so she said a quick goodbye and left.

“Ahh…”

Quenser used his dull mind to think about how peaceful things were here in the middle of the battlefield, but…

“Surely that’s just a preposterous rumor like the worm burgers, right?”

He had himself worried now.

Part 2

In truth, the Legitimacy Kingdom's 37th Mobile Maintenance Battalion was in a state of limbo.

"Eh? We're not waiting for a one-on-one fight with the Trinity Style?"

Quenser frantically spoke up inside the Object maintenance facility. The old maintenance lady sighed, but she was not working on the Baby Magnum. She was photographing the various remains of the small robots known as Dvergr and the armor panels that had come from the Trinity Style the night before.

"It's true the Faith Organization probably wants to take a bite at us, but they're taking their time after raising the White Flag themselves. They'll want to get back at us since we injured them and they'll also want to silence that Pilot Elite. …Skuld Silent-Third was it?"

She sounded disinterested.

"But that's only what they want, so we have no reason to go along with it. We completed our original plan by attacking that flower garden with its intentionally contaminated pollen in order to end the production of the new drug they use to make Elites. There's no reason to stick around now. A unit costs tax money every day it's deployed like this."

"Then why don't we withdraw already?"

"By carelessly damaging the Trinity Style and forcing it to withdraw, you seem to have nearly changed the minds of the bored higher ups in the safe countries. They aren't sure if we should withdraw immediately or keep going and maybe destroy a 5 billion dollar Second Generation and take its tech for ourselves."

"There's also something else preventing us from moving on."

The Pilot Elite Princess must not have had anything better to do because she walked over to join them. Her unreadable eyes observed the wreckage lined up like a scene from an airplane crash investigation.

“Even under normal circumstances, we have to worry about being attacked while withdrawing, but now we have so many more people,” said the Princess. “A withdrawal is going to take time, so waiting around is dangerous.”

“Yeah, the Trinity Style ran off, but the Faith Organization soldiers were left on the battlefield,” added Quenser. “We took them all prisoner, didn’t we?”

“Frolaytia wasn’t happy about that,” said the old maintenance lady. “Even POWs need clothes, food, and shelter and that costs money. She was complaining about how you don’t even need to develop a new weapon to end the war. She said you just need to have a billion of your people surrender to the enemy in order to apply financial pressure.”

“Hold on. That doesn’t mean our rations will get even worse, does it? I’m not sure I want to see how that’s even possible.”

The Princess looked up at Quenser while she crouched down and poked at the wreckage.

“But those are good,” she said innocently. “They’re like a special treat.”

“What the hell!? Are you one of those people who thinks hospital food is something special!? You have a fridge and microwave in your cockpit, so you know nothing of our suffering!!”

“I’m so sick of pizza and burgers. There’s no surprise in the flavor…”

“Kiiii!!”

“Stop that, boy. Overwhelming anger is no reason to strip.”

At any rate, the entire battalion had nothing to do until their next

orders came in. And even if they were to withdraw, it might not happen very quickly due to the Faith Organization POWs inflating their numbers.

(Well, I don't really care as long as I can study Object design here.)

Then a transmission from Frolaytia reached the old lady's tablet.

"Any luck analyzing that Dvergr?"

"The individual tech isn't anything special. It looks more suited to a space station or a remote controlled Mars rover than military use, though."

The old lady glanced over at the crushed robots.

"Then there's the tech used to link them together into a solid fifty meter, two hundred thousand ton mass. I haven't a clue what kind of pattern they use. These crushed ones aren't enough. I'd need quite a few 'living' samples to even know where to start."

"So it's like the difference between pencil lead and carbon nanotubes even though they're both carbon?"

"I'm glad you understand. The electronic simulation division was all excited about digitally reproducing it, but we'll see if that gets anywhere."

"That means Quenser is just wasting time over there, doesn't it? Could you send him over here? I think I have a more important lesson for him."

(What's this, what's this? Is busty silver-haired Frolaytia going to be loosening her collar to give me some 'adult' lessons!? O-oh, no! I have to make sure she wears glasses when in teacher mode!!)

Quenser started straining his ears to listen in, but Frolaytia's explanation led elsewhere.

"Now that she's had a night to recover her energy, I think it's time to begin the interrogation of Skuld, the Faith Organization Pilot Elite. If you're interested in enemy technology, then come watch,

Quenser.”

Part 3

Quenser left the Object maintenance facility and started toward a different building, but he ran across a vehicle having engine trouble on the way.

“What’s this about, Heivia? Did the thing stall out inside the base?”

“Oh, shut up. …Goddammit, I can’t believe this!? Again!? I already opened up the hood and dealt with this!!”

“That’s unusual. Did someone get lax with the maintenance?”

He glanced inside the hood and saw something like white steam rising from within.

“No, it’s bugs.” Heivia sounded utterly disgusted. “I don’t know how they’re getting in, but they must think the dark and cramped engine grill is the perfect bed. You know how you’ll find a ton of them when you turn over a heavy rock? Well, they’re messing with the engine and burning onto the thing.”

“Ugh.”

“And that means I’ve got to use a brush to scrape off the bugs that are burned onto the pipes and stuff. Experimental Battlefield Madagascar can go straight to hell. These strange bugs are everywhere.”

“Well, Heivia, Frolaytia called me in to help with Skuld’s interrogation, so I’ll catch you later!”

“You coldhearted bastard!! And what’s this about interrogating a girl!? Is it gonna be sexy? And how far are you going? Is it gonna be one-on-one between that busty commander in black leather bondage gear and Skuld with a ball gag!? As your mother, I cannot allow that kind of closed-door investigation!!”

Since his awful friend would not stop complaining, Quenser raised his middle finger and continued on to the facility where Frolaytia

and Skuld awaited.

The detention barracks were normally used to hold soldiers who had screwed up and it normally ate up maintenance costs without getting much use, but the problem was how indispensable it was at times. That may have been why Frolaytia seemed to be in a bad mood as she leaned against the wall with her arms crossed.

“Are you ready?” she asked.

“Well, I’m just watching, so I’m ready when you are. This place really is packed full of Faith Organization people, isn’t it?”

“There are 203 including the Elite, so it’s like a small school. The lower level has the group cells and the upper level has the individual cells.”

Still leaning against the wall, Frolaytia used her chin to gesture down a corridor blocked by metal bars and doors at a few points. One wall contained a row of doors with peepholes and the other wall contained a row of windows covered with a thick wire mesh. The signs painted on the walls and floor indicated there was a stairway at the end.

The cells behind the bars had originally been individual cells, but they had been left with no choice but to throw up to about ten people into each one. While they had air conditioning, they had to share the blanket and toilet, so it was not exactly a comfortable living space.

“Skuld has her own cell, but the others are all in there together. Of course, asking for funding to expand the detention barracks would be an embarrassment to our unit.”

Frolaytia opened a nearby door.

Instead of Skuld’s interrogation room, it was the neighboring room. One wall was a one-way mirror and the rest of the room was filled with flat screen monitors and analysis equipment. Two indoorsy-looking soldiers were already in there. They may have been specialists in determining the veracity of a statement based on the

speaker's expression and eye movements.

The room beyond the special mirror had a table and two chairs just like a scene from a police drama. However, the furniture was bolted to the floor and the girl in one chair had her arms handcuffed to the top of the table.

It was Skuld.

She was the Trinity Style's Pilot Elite. Or rather, she was *one of* its Elites.

On the other hand, the interrogator sitting across from her looked to be from the intelligence division.

The woman wore her uniform perfectly by the book in a different way than Frolaytia did. She had long black hair, thin-framed glasses, and giant breasts.

"Damn, I need to be careful. If I'm not, I might accidentally call her 'Class Rep'."

"Quenser, the intercom is active."

He quickly began to cough, but the blushing glasses woman beyond the one-way mirror could not stop her shoulders from trembling.

Frolaytia casually spoke into the microphone sitting on top of the equipment.

"Sorry about killing your enthusiasm like that, Second Lieutenant Elfily, but duty is duty. Please get this started."

"Understood. …Now, let's try this again. Nice to meet you. My name is Elfily Classic. I belong to the 37th's intelligence division and my rank is second lieutenant. I have been placed in charge of your interrogation."

"…"

"Now for some jabs. How about we start with what is protected by international law? What is your name and affiliation? …Telling me

that should not qualify as treason."

After her name, the discussion continued to age, blood type, birthplace, height, and weight. It was all personal information, but it was made to gradually dig into one's privacy and complexes. The questions were sometimes gentle and sometimes rude. It was all so varied that Quenser could not tell what the point of the questions was.

"She called these jabs, remember?" commented Frolaytia. "We're observing the girl's reactions."

"?"

"This room is filled with two million euros' worth of equipment and it isn't just for decoration. We're monitoring body temperature, perspiration, eye movements, facial muscle tension, changes in breath volume, and really just any kind of reaction people make when they lie. That said, an expert can fool all of that, so we like to fine-tune the equipment as much as possible before getting to the questions that truly matter."

As the boring(?) questioning continued, Quenser finally heard a topic he cared about.

"I would like to ask about the Trinity Style."

"Are you going to inject me with something if I don't talk? Oh, but I hear using the mucous membrane of the nose is the latest trend. It leaves less of a mark after all."

"The Object in question uses three Pilot Elites at once. I have a report saying you yourself admitted to that, so will holding your tongue do you any good here?"

"Curse him and his loose lips…"

Even through the one-way mirror, her low voice made Quenser's heart skip a beat. It was impossible, but he still felt like she was looking right at him.

Meanwhile, the Class Re-…no, the second lieutenant in glasses

continued speaking.

“This concerns your own safety in addition to our technological investigation and understanding of our enemy’s capabilities. How valuable you are to the Faith Organization will tell us how likely they are to target you while you are restrained here. If we do not understand that, we cannot continue to the next stage. That remains true whether you wish to return to the Faith Organization or to defect to the Legitimacy Kingdom.”

“…”

Skuld fell silent for a while, but she finally rattled the handcuffs holding her arms to the table. She clasped her fingers together and slowly provided the desired information.

“Our Norn always uses three pilots. The Elites are Skuld – that’s me – as well as Verdandi and Urd. You know where those names come from, don’t you?”

“Three goddesses from Norse mythology. They were the goddesses of fate or of time.”

“Not only do we work together, but we really are blood-related sisters. And that’s why I doubt they’ll show any mercy.”

“Meaning?”

“Did you think we got along just because we’re sisters? Once the disappointment starts to spread, the familial hatred will settle in. Their heads will boil with anger as they go on about me being a blot on the family name.”

“You mean they will not consider you expendable and leave you here because they have multiple Pilot Elites?”

“They’ll come after me for revenge. I 100% guarantee it.”

Skuld gave an exasperated shake of the head.

“As you know, the Norn’s design and specs can change. That changes who the Object’s main pilot is. …That previous one was

Urd's, but if Verdandi takes over, the Object's traits will change entirely. What you did last time won't work again."

Frolaytia spoke without using the microphone.

"That also means Verdandi is the only card still up their sleeve. We don't know what Skuld's mode is, but they can't use it with her here. Maybe it would be safer to make an attack and reveal that card."

"No, not necessarily," reflexively replied Quenser. "We can't completely trust what Skuld says. That might have been Skuld's mode last time, leaving them both Urd and Verdandi's modes in reserve. It's also possible all three sisters can use all three modes and they're just better with their own than the others. If so, that's three Objects times three people for nine patterns overall. With one person out of the equation, they still have six battle patterns left."

"Perhaps. On top of that, we have no guarantee each sister only has the one mode. If each one has three or four, the combination of cards grows indefinitely."

"My sisters will kill me," said Skuld in the interrogation room.

The scratchy, resigned voice sounded out-of-place coming from such a young girl.

"They will come to kill me no matter what. Fate is absolute to the Norn, so they honestly believe that throwing off our plans for victory is a violation of our proper behavior. That is why they will kill me."

"We have heard that the Faith Organization has developed a unique process for converting belief into a fighting spirit. Is that what this is?"

"Have you heard the term 'berserker'?"

"Doesn't that primarily refer to a method of numbing foot soldiers' fear before making a charge?"

"It's based in mass hysteria. Just like a rock star's enthusiasm

spreads to the audience during a concert. We act as an amplifier to boost the berserker effect. The greater our enthusiasm, the greater the frenzy among the berserkers. That atmosphere is then sent back to us, creating an even greater explosion of emotion. Then the process repeats."

"In that case…"

"Our base zone is probably filled with war cries right about now. They'll be yelling for the traitor's head. What my sisters hate most of all is letting the heat die down. They will be keeping the engine running no matter what it takes."

"…"

It was not a pleasant conversation.

Quenser decided to ask Frolaytia a question.

"What's going to happen to Skuld now?"

"That depends on what she wants and what the higher ups are willing to allow. It's possible she will defect to our side or she might be thrown back to the Faith Organization. She also might be treated as a hostage and used in a prisoner exchange to settle some troublesome diplomatic issue or another."

What she was saying sounded simple, but there was no emotion in Frolaytia's voice.

She then changed the subject.

"Anyway, that's about as much as we can ask about her personally. Quenser, if you have any questions about the Trinity Style, tell Elfily through her intercom. If she's in a good mood, she'll ask about it."

"U-um, then…"

Quenser thought for a moment before doing so.

"Miss Elfily, if you have the chance, can you ask about something?

The Trinity Style is composed of a bunch of small robots, so why are they fixated on making a giant Object? If they have spare robots, they should be able to make a second identical one. If it's about the reactor, they could always put in a prototype one. Just thin out the armor a little and they might have been able to use two at once."

Beyond the mirror, the glasses woman casually changed the flow of conversation.

"Miss Skuld, I have a question somewhat concerning your relationship with your sisters. The Trinity Style is composed of small robots…"

"Oh? I thought she might still be mad about what you said at the beginning, but it looks like she actually likes you, Quenser. Maybe that Class Rep has a thing for baby faces."

"Frolaytia, the intercom is still on."

Frolaytia started coughing, but it was too late. It was becoming unclear whether they were watching Skuld's interrogation or enjoying how embarrassed the busty glasses Class Rep had grown.

Regardless, Skuld answered the question presented to her.

"The Object only has meaning by being an Object."

"What do you mean by that?"

"You don't get it? It's true we could make all sorts of things with the Dvergr. We could make a great number of them if they were on the level of tanks or armored trucks, but that would be meaningless. No one would fear that. The battle begins before a weapon is used. Only a second-rate weapon does not strike fear in the heart of the enemy before it is ever used. That is why we have no interest in anything but the most powerful Object. If we lowered the specs to split it into two or three, the enemy would just pick them off one by one."

That was indeed one aspect of the clean wars touted by the world powers.

It was not enough to say you could never know until you tried.

When facing normal weapons like tanks or fighters, it was best to make sure the enemy never even thought about trying to use them against you. When facing another Object, you had to make sure the enemy knew their specs were hopelessly inferior before the battle began. That prevented wars from dragging on, that kept them clean, and that preserved world peace.

That was the modern trend.

And that was exactly why Skuld had reached her conclusion.

“My sisters will kill me.”

She had returned to her initial claim.

The danger she sensed was finally coming into view.

“The Norn must be the most powerful. All else must be sacrificed if it means maintaining its special position at the top. The Elite being captured alive will mar the ‘legend’. That is why Urd and Verdandi will do whatever it takes to resurrect that legend. The first thing they need to do is make a bloodbath out of the one who harmed the Norn’s status as the strongest.”

Part 4

They left Skuld in the interrogation room and took a coffee break.

A time of elegant ladies and gentlemen began while watching the prisoner through the one-way mirror.

“Hey, no fair! The intelligence division gets coffee!? All we get is soap-like rations and lukewarm water!”

“This is a strategy to let the scent reach the restrained Elite and shake her heart by reminding her of the finer things in life. More importantly, you two!! Why do you keep calling me a class rep while I’m trying to work!?”

Quenser and Frolaytia both began coughing.

At any rate, Quenser used the confusion to grab some iced coffee for himself and began the discussion as if simply chatting.

“Man, that was some surprisingly heavy stuff back there.”

Quenser was a little disheartened, but Frolaytia and Elfily must have been used to it. The Class Re-…no, Elfily smiled his way.

“With Elites, it isn’t uncommon to find they were taken into the military for ‘protection’ due to a complicated upbringing or family environment. If the military feels like the most comfortable place for them, they won’t get any unwelcome ideas. That kind of restraint is quite effective given the modern system of clean wars settled by one-on-one battles.”

“(Hm, she really does look happy. Maybe she’s less a class rep than she is a gentle liberal arts teacher.)”

“Major, do not forget that I belong to the intelligence division which excels at gathering information!”

When Frolaytia started to cough on reflex, some ashes burst from the end of her kiseru like a tiny eruption.

Quenser was sitting across from her, so he was hit full in the face.

“Hot!? Wait! Low temperature candles are one thing, but I think pipe ashes are a little too advanced for me!!”

“Ah! What are you two doing!? C-come here. Start by cooling your forehead with this glass of iced coffee. …Um, is there anything in this survival kit I can use?”

“(She really does like to take care of people. Could it be…?)”

That was when Quenser and the two women heard an odd sound. It sounded like a great number of small things hitting the wall. Quenser initially thought of rain blowing in the wind, but it had been sunny outside. More importantly, the monitoring room next to the interrogation room had no windows. The walls were too thick to hear the rain so clearly even during a cyclone.

“Hm? What is that?”

Asking was not going to help, so Quenser walked to the door with the glass of iced coffee still pressed against his forehead. He could see what was going on through the corridor windows which were covered with wire mesh to prevent anyone from escaping.

At first, he had no idea what was going on.

It was completely dark. Unlike the windowless interrogation room and monitoring room, the corridor’s fluorescent lights were kept off during the day. Even so, it should not have been as dark as a school or hospital at night. It was almost like the sunlight from the windows was being completely blocked off.

“The…windows?”

The mystery sound had grown much louder.

When the boy looked over, the situation finally dawned on him.

It took a moment longer before the intense revulsion and terror assaulted him.

Black bugs were covering every inch of the windows.

The outside world had become a storm of tens of thousands or even hundreds of thousands of winged insects.

Part 5

“A-ahh…”

He did not know what to do.

He could not even tell if he had decided to step back. Whatever the case, he fell back onto his butt and screamed the only syllable that came to his blank mind.

“Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh

His scream brought Frolaytia and Elfily from the monitoring room. They too were shocked when they saw it.

And by this point, Quenser had realized how strange this was.

“Wh-where are the guards?”

They were in the detention barracks, the prison that one’s own war criminals or captured enemy soldiers were thrown into. Unlike the other facilities, it had strict security, but no one showed up when Quenser screamed and no one had reported on the bugs. They had not even received a radio transmission.

What was going on outside?

Were those bugs really so violent that they could bring down soldiers equipped heavily enough to deal with escapees or rioters?

“Wh-what is this…?”

Elfily was dumbfounded by this threat that went beyond mere bullets or knives. Her mind’s ability to face a threat may have short-circuited. Quenser understood all too well what that was like.

The only one with any real guts was Frolaytia.

She narrowed her eyes and observed the black bugs covering the entire surface of the windows.

“They look like a type of bell cricket. I don’t know the exact name, though.”

“Bell?”

“Because their chirping sounds like a bell. These look a lot like the ones I saw in a pet shop that specialized in the Island Nation.”

Frolaytia blew smoke from her seductive lips, but it did not reach the insects on the other side of the window.

“But this might be bad.”

“Why? When raising crickets, you feed them sliced cucumber or eggplant, right? Then this isn’t as bad as wasps or scorpions.”

“Bell crickets are omnivorous. They will even start eating each other if they aren’t given some occasional animal protein like dried sardines or ham. So with this many… Take a look at that, Quenser.”

“I-I’d rather not look at that disgusting mess!!”

“Just do it. Besides, bell crickets are nocturnal, so it isn’t normal for so many to be out during the day. They also generally can’t fly despite having wings, so it isn’t normal for so many of them to be covering the window. Most of all, most of these have faded to a slight brown instead of being pure black. Do you know what that means?”

“You don’t mean…”

It was busty Elfily who answered, not Quenser.

“Their instinctual behavior and color are meant to keep their natural predators from attacking them, right? So if they’ve abandoned that effort…”

“This might be what you call ‘brazen bugs’. When a swarm of locusts grows too large, they abandon their camouflaging coloration and begin attacking other animals and plants. This must be a similar phenomenon with the bell crickets.”

Frolaytia brushed up her bangs with a hand.

“And bell crickets are omnivorous. They normally only eat small bug carcasses and they wouldn’t think about actively preying on other creatures like this, but as you can see, things change when there are tens or even hundreds of thousands of them. Even we could be bitten to pieces if they swarmed us.”

“…”

“…”

It was not a nice death to think about.

Their focus naturally turned toward the window. Even the group that had been carefully observing Skuld through the one-way mirror was looking out into the corridor.

Some of the crickets were chewing on the wire mesh installed on the outside of the window and some kind of strange liquid was flowing out. Was that because they were squishing each other under their combined weight? Or had they started feasting on each other?

This was different from a bullet or knife. It was also different from being attacked by a lion or tiger. The thought of being brazenly eaten by creatures lower on the food chain brought feelings of humiliation and disgust. The worst part of all was the cruelty of how they could not be communicated with, how they could not be killed easily, and how they were entirely indiscriminate.

They knew all that, but what were they supposed to do now?

“I can’t believe this. It doesn’t matter how many bullets or explosives we have, there’s nothing we can do. We’ll use up all our ammo in no time and then they’ll swarm us,” said Quenser. “But if we ask the Princess to deal with them using the Baby Magnum, she would just blow away the maintenance base zone with us inside. … Hm? Come to think of it, what happened to the Princess!?”

He quickly pulled out his radio, but no amount of pressing buttons got any response.

He only heard even static.

“You’re kidding, right? Don’t tell me a bunch of bugs took out a colossal weapon that can survive a nuke!”

“No, they wouldn’t be able to do that much. Quenser, as a future engineer, you should know a lot of random trivia. Have you ever heard of insects being used to predict unexpected tornados?”

“When the radar picks up the bugs that are caught in the supercell, they know a tornado is probably coming. …Hold on.”

“Yes. Insects reflect electromagnetic waves. It normally isn’t a big deal, but when his many of them form a wall, they can probably cut off a weaker signal.”

That meant all the bugs swarming the maintenance base were separating the soldiers of the 37th from each other. It was like a blinding sandstorm outside and their allies had to be right there, but they could not reach each other.

“It might be best to stay put,” said Elfily while uneasily looking back and forth between the black window and the tablet that was of no use with communications cut off. “At the very least, there was no warning about this kind of natural disaster in the environmental report before this mission. That means this has not been seen in the last few decades. Plus, this is not something we can deal with using bullets or knives. We might take less damage if we wait for the storm to pass instead of trying to exterminate them with what we have on hand. Don’t these abnormal swarms of bugs tend to end fairly quickly?”

“Yes. It’s the sad story of the food chain. The more of them there are, the greater the threat, but they also end up eating each other. And as I said, bell crickets are perfectly willing to eat each other if there isn’t enough food. The problem should solve itself in two or three days.”

Quenser felt himself relax when he heard that passive solution.

He had truly been worried he would be ordered to build a

handmade flamethrower and then run out to face the storm of bugs.

“Still…this is insane. Who would think these tiny bugs could paralyze a base for the weapon that ended the nuclear age and rules the current battlefield?”

“Insects and small animals were a constant nuisance in older wars too. You might cover the ultimate tank in dried grass for camouflage, but mice would use it as a bed and then chew through the wiring, turning it into a metal coffin.”

That reminded Quenser of running across Heivia having trouble with a malfunctioning vehicle. It had been something about a bunch of bugs getting into the engine. That may have been a sign of things to come.

However, this was a military facility and one made sturdy enough to prevent war criminals and POWs from escaping. Even if all hell had broken loose outside, the crickets could not get in so easily.

Or so he thought.

That idea proved naïve.

“Wait a second… What is this noise?”

He heard a bell-like chirping.

Frolaytia and Elfily looked up at the corridor ceiling in shock. It was the same reaction people gave during an earthquake or lightning strike.

“Are you sure it isn’t from outside the window?”

“No, it’s too clear for that. There aren’t many, but it seems some have gotten in somehow.” Frolaytia calmly shot down the Class Rep’s wishful thinking. “Quenser! We need to split up and check all the corridor’s windows and doors. Take some duct tape with you and apply it like weather stripping!!”

“Why just the corridor!? The cells also have windows!”

“Wait!!”

This time Elfily cut in with a powerful voice.

Quenser looked puzzled, so the busty glasses Class Rep continued.

Her face had grown pale.

“We cannot open the cell doors. The Faith Organization prisoners would rush out if we did!!”

“This is no time to be worried about that!”

They only had to press a button in the guard room.

No keys were needed. This kind of prison used strict security to keep people from getting in or out, but to ensure the bare minimum of human rights, there was always an emergency evacuation system that opened all of the cell exits and corridor doors.

But despite that…no, because of that, Elfily quickly stopped him.

Because it was easy, she could let him do it so easily.

“There are more than two hundred of them!! And there are only five of us including the analysts in the monitoring room. This might be a Legitimacy Kingdom base zone, but we can’t expect any reinforcements. If we open those doors, the detention barracks will become an isolated piece of Faith Organization territory!!”

“I can’t believe this,” spat out Quenser.

Painstakingly opening and closing each door to check on the windows would take too long. The crickets were getting in and they would quickly fill the entire building. Yet if they opened all the doors to ask for help, the Faith Organization prisoners could easily gang up on them. And fear of that had to be double for women like Frolaytia and Elfily.

The risk was too great either way.

Quenser understood that, but after thinking on it, he made his

decision.

“Opening the cell doors is the only option.”

“Are you serious!?”

“The Faith Organization are human too, so we can explain the situation to them. The bugs on the other hand aren’t going to wait around! If they pour in here, we’ll definitely be eaten. There’s no persuading or threatening them! So we need to go with the option that has some slight chance of working!!”

Quenser and Elfily turned toward Frolaytia. After taking a puff on her kiseru, their commander exhaled the smoke.

“Let’s go with Quenser’s idea. If we don’t apply the weather stripping as soon as possible, we can’t survive.”

“～ ～ ～!!!???”

Elfily was about ready to stomp her feet in frustration, but Quenser ignored her and ran to the fire alarm on the wall. Once he smashed the glass and pressed the button, a shrill bell rang, red lights flashed, and all of the doors along the corridor slid open with an unsettling noise.

Men in neon prisoner uniforms rushed out, so Quenser raised his hands and shouted to them.

“If you want to head outside, be my guest!! But only if you have the guts to make an escape right now!!”

The cells had windows, so the prisoners would know the situation outside. A few of them still stepped forward with bloodshot eyes and it likely had to do with more than just being frustrated.

“What is-...? …!?”

A door slowly opened next to Quenser’s group and Skuld stepped out looking puzzled. That Pilot Elite was almost a target of reverence for the Faith Organization. The interrogation room had no windows, so she was clearly shocked by the truth she found

before her eyes.

Frolaytia pulled a handgun from her waist.

However, she did not aim toward the prisoners. She aimed at the window right next to her.

That window was still absolutely covered with black insects.

“If I find I cannot expect all of you to act logically, I will immediately break this window. Then we will all be bug-food together. It would be a tragedy either way, but I’ll take that over being made into your plaything. Now, which will it be?”

“…”

“Help us. We need to apply weather stripping to the cell windows!”

Before they could waste any more time glaring at each other, Quenser tossed a few handcuff keys and rolls of duct tape to Skuld. When she saw the boy get to work on the corridor window, the twintail girl sighed and nodded. That seemed to settle it for the Faith Organization. Skuld followed Quenser and the soldiers given some duct tape returned to their cells.

“(Watch them carefully. They might be searching for something they can use as a weapon.)”

Elfily moved in close and whispered in Quenser’s ear while helping with the work.

She discreetly warned him without letting Skuld notice.

“(Wearing a plastic toothbrush down to a point is enough to kill and you gave them duct tape. Combine that with something else and they can make any kind of ‘science project’ they want. That is how things work here.)”

“I know that.”

“(I am not saying your decision was wrong, but you still need to be careful. And since you have explosives with you, you are the last

one we can have falling into their hands.)”

“We’re done over here!”

A man in a prisoner uniform rushed out of a nearby cell.

Elfily ended her conversation, grabbed the duct tape from Quenser’s hand, and casually moved to another window.

The Faith Organization soldier continued speaking without noticing.

“Saint Skuld, allow me to do that so you need not dirty your hands …What is even going on here? What are those? Bell crickets!?”

“What’s your name?”

“Eric. Eric Kingsvalley. Nice to meet you.”

“I’m Quenser Barbotage. Just come with me! Oh, right…”

Quenser removed his backpack and handed it to Eric.

Elfily stared at him in shock from a short distance away, but he did not care.

“This is my Hand Axe plastic explosive. You take it. Carrying a weapon around like that is stifling me.”

“But…”

“You can’t set them off without a fuse. Not even throwing them into a fire would work. I’ll keep those fuses, so now neither of us can detonate them.”

“…”

After some thought, Eric put the backpack on.

Then he and Quenser shook hands.

The hot-blooded exchange between guys must not have gotten through to her because Skuld tilted her head and cut in.

“What do we do now?”

“I don’t know! Just double check all the windows and doors! We can hear the crickets chirping from somewhere, so we need to seal up wherever it is as soon as we can!!”

“No, wait.”

Just as he started to do that, Eric came to a stop.

He and the other Faith Organization soldiers looked up to the ceiling.

“What is it?”

“It might not just be the windows and doors. I don’t know the exact layout of this place, but how do the ventilation ducts work?”

“Goddammit, are you serious!?”

They all looked up. It was a tall ceiling and the ventilation duct covers were out of reach. Then Skuld beckoned Quenser over with her index finger.

“You said your name is Quenser, right? Give me the tools and bend over. I’ll ride on your shoulders.”

“Saint Skuld! Allow one of us to take your place!!”

“Shut up. We don’t have time and we need someone light on top, don’t we?”

No one argued.

A lot went through Quenser’s mind as he did as he was told.

(Instead of using two Faith Organization people, she’s making sure Eric can still move freely. She hasn’t forgotten the most basic etiquette.)

“But who cares about the details when I get to have a cute girl’s legs and crotch wrapped around my head!?”

“Eh? What?”

Skuld looked confused as she climbed onto his shoulders from behind with surprisingly shameless motions.

As soon as Quenser gathered strength in his back and straightened up, he nearly lost sight of reality thanks to the sensation on the back of his neck and his cheeks.

“Ahahh…”

“There, right there. Stop, stop! Why do you keep moving back and forth like that!?”

That was of course because he wanted to delay her work and enjoy her warmth for as long as possible, gravity of the situation be damned, but then something went wrong.

Once Skuld removed the ventilation duct cover and stuck her head inside, she completely lost her balance.

“Hyah!?”

“Saint Skuld!!”

Quenser nearly performed an accidental suplex on her, but since diligent Eric faithfully held his hands out from behind, they only fell to the ground. Eric and Quenser screamed when they looked to Skuld who had cutely fallen onto her butt.

A single black bell cricket sat on top of her head.

“Gyah!?”

“Gyah!?”

Quenser quickly brushed it off and Eric crushed it underfoot.

“?”

Only Skuld looked confused.

She had likely lost her balance after looking it in the eye at point-blank range, but she must not have known it had gotten in her hair. If she had, she would have been far more panicked.

“Crap! Crap, crap, crap!!”

Frolaytia ran over when she heard the commotion.

“What is it, Quenser? Give me an intelligible report!”

“There’s…some of…a few of them in here! A few crickets!!”

“Did they eat through the gas filter?”

Frolaytia sounded annoyed and she tore her medals and battalion patch from her coat. Then she stripped off the coat.

“We need to buy some time. Stuff a few balled-up coats into the ventilation ducts to block them off. They aren’t big enough for someone to crawl through, so it should be easy to block them off.”

“B-but! There isn’t just the one duct. We would have to figure out which filter was eaten through and-…!!”

Elfily trailed off because the entire corridor shook and tilted unnaturally. No, the entire building did. The solid detention barracks creaked like a rickety suspension bridge.

Quenser grew pale.

“What is it now?”

“This is bad,” replied Elfily.

She gave a blatantly cautious look to Skuld and Eric who had the Hand Axe.

“They must have eaten through the tires. The entire maintenance base zone is made from a convoy of more than one hundred vehicles, so all of the buildings are actually a number of panels put together on top of those flat vehicles!”

The weight was distributed between thirty or forty tires as tall as Quenser was, but if one of them blew, that equation would no longer work. With the extra weight, the odds were good the rest would blow too.

And if the overall balance had shifted…

“The entire detention barracks will collapse onto its side?”

If that happened, the windows and doors would be the least of their

worries. The panels of the exterior walls would bend, break, and create large gaps. Once the omnivorous crickets poured in by the hundreds of thousands, the soldiers equipped with puny guns and explosives would be bug-food.

“Does that mean we can’t hope to hole up here?”

Eric asked that while protecting Skuld and looking like even the saliva he needed to gulp had dried up.

“Then what do we do!? Are we just going to wait here for the bugs outside to eat us!?”

The rain-like sound of the bugs on the windows applied pressure to all of the human hearts inside.

Quenser thought and then looked to Frolaytia.

“Frolaytia, tell me more about the gas filter they ate through.”

“Hm? Okay. I think it was a filtration membrane type rather than an activated charcoal type. I believe several thin stocking-like membranes were placed over it.”

“Next question: Does this maintenance base have any buildings built solidly on the ground instead of on a vehicle?”

“A few impromptu storage buildings next to the Object maintenance facility. The wreckage of the Trinity Style took up some of the space for the other equipment, so I believe they threw the less-used equipment in there.”

“Then that’s our only path to survival. If we escaped to anywhere else, the tires could blow just like here.”

“Escaped?”

Elfily sounded like she was questioning his sanity.

That was hardly surprising. Anyone would think that with those brazen bugs covering the windows so thickly they blocked out the sun.

“You’re saying we should leave here and run to those other buildings!? That’s suicidal!!”

“So is staying here. And once the building does topple over, we’ll lose all chance at survival. We won’t know which direction to run. With the windows like that, it must be worse than a sandstorm out there. You won’t even be able to see a few dozen centimeters away. If we’re thrown out there while panicked, there’s no way we can survive.”

“Are you saying we can reach the sturdy storage building if we remain calm?”

Eric spoke up as the representative of the prisoners.

He continued to stand protectively in front Pilot Elite Skuld and he seemed to be choosing his words carefully in her place. He and the rest of the Faith Organization may have been judging Quenser here.

“If you have a compass and focus only on the direction, you can reach your destination without being able to see. And were you listening, Eric? The filter is only as thick as a stocking, yet it was only just now eaten through. There are still only a few crickets in here, so their jaws aren’t that strong.”

“Are you forgetting they can eat through military tires meant to bear several thousand tons!?”

“Yes, but those are on the outside, so the crickets would have been targeting them from the very beginning. That means it takes them a long time to blow a tire. Again, they aren’t that powerful. Our uniforms, Skuld’s special suit, and your prison uniforms are all sturdy. Wrap duct tape around the collar and sleeves and I think we can walk outside for a short time.”

Then he looked around and spoke to the other Faith Organization soldiers.

“Also, we can protect our faces and heads with duct tape too. We would suffocate if we covered our mouth and nose, so we’ll have to stick with towels there. Unfortunately, there’s nothing we can do

about our eyes. We don't have enough goggles for everyone, so we'll just have to use our own hands to protect them the best we can. Is that good enough!?"

"I see. So only the great Legitimacy Kingdom gets to safely use goggles, hm?" asked Eric. "And are you going to send us out first to see if we get eaten?"

"That would be best," admitted Quenser. "But unfortunately, I'm only a student. I can't make use of that kind of privilege."

"Wait. You mean…?"

"I'm going without goggles too. We're all in this together, so is anyone coming with me!? Or will you stay here and wait for the building to fall over!? The choice is yours, but we don't have much time!!"

The entire corridor gave another disconcerting creak.

The building was already twisting and it could rupture at any time. If a gap opened and the bugs got in, all of this discussion would be meaningless.

It was only a matter of time.

"Get a clue already. If we wanted to kill you, we wouldn't have taken you prisoner. Food costs money no matter who eats it. Why would we bother spending money on you just to trick you later? It would've been faster to just shoot you on the battlefield. Right?"

"…"

Eric began to open his mouth, but he must not have had an argument because he glanced over to his comrades for help. None of them complained, so he finally turned back to Skuld who nodded.

"Let's go with that. The Faith Organization and Legitimacy Kingdom doesn't have to start getting along, but I'm only here because that Quenser took me with him when he didn't have to."

“If you say so, Saint Skuld.”

That settled it for them.

“Let’s get started.”

Once Quenser said that, they got down to business. They sealed off the important parts of their clothes with duct tape and covered their mouths and noses with towels.

Frolaytia whispered to Quenser from nearby.

“(You need to give Second Lieutenant Elfily a thank-you gift later on, Quenser.)”

“?”

“(It might have sounded like she was snapping at you before, but that cut off any complaints the Faith Organization might have made. If they had started a flood of complaints, you wouldn’t have been able to deal with them all. I guess she really is part of the intelligence division.)”

Quenser glanced over at Elfily who was wrapping duct tape around herself not far away, but she looked away when she noticed him.

Meanwhile, they completed their preparations.

They were of course all worried. Training books for new soldiers said nothing about situations like this, but waiting around would mean waiting for the bugs to eat them.

“Once you’re outside, only focus on the compass in your hand. The safe storage building is eight hundred meters southeast. Got that? Eight hundred meters! The compass will tell you the direction, so calculate the distance using your steps. There will be almost zero visibility, so you won’t be able to see even a meter away. Looking up will probably kill your senses of distance and direction! So focus on the compass in your hand!! Only on the compass!! Got that!?”

Quenser shouted at them to motivate them.

“As I said, each individual cricket isn’t that strong. They won’t break through your uniform right away! So as long as you don’t get lost, you can reach the storage building safely. Don’t think about rushing forward. No matter how many bugs get on you, keep moving in the same direction at the same pace. This is the safest way. So let’s do this. It’s time to open the door!! Are you ready!?”

“Ohh!!”

Quenser and Frolaytia tore off the duct tape covering the door. They were discarding their own temporary peace of mind, but they had to say goodbye to that. That “temporary” peace of mind was a bottomless swamp. Once they sank into it, they would be stuck and could only wait for death.

That action changed everything.

Elfily and Skuld both gulped and looked to the door.

This would normally be unthinkable, but the detention barracks were of no more use. This felt like a symbol of that.

“We just have to do it.”

Quenser unlocked the door and grabbed the doorknob.

As he pressed his shoulder against the heavy metal door, he gave one last yell.

Instead of encouraging the others, it may have been to make sure he himself did not come to a stop.

“Begin! Let’s go!!”

He made up his mind and opened the door.

A moment later, he saw something truly unexpected.

An intense wave of heat struck his entire body.

Instead of a black storm, he saw an all-encompassing sea of flames.

Part 6

A little earlier, Heivia had also been facing the black hell.

Since he had been fighting the stalled vehicle outdoors, he would have noticed the strange situation earlier than Quenser and the others.

“Dammit. What the hell is that!?”

At first, it looked like a black tsunami approaching from beyond the horizon.

Once the guard in the watchtower realized it was a swarm of bugs, a biological sense of fear and disgust must have come over them. Heivia could hear them firing their semi-auto sniper rifle wildly.

But even if each bullet took out a few bugs, it did not even make a dent in a swarm of tens or even hundreds of thousands.

Heivia threw his tools aside as soon as he saw the watchtower entirely swallowed up by the black mass.

His face stiffened with fear as he turned tail and fled.

“You’ve got to be kidding me!!”

He used his radio to inform the others of the oddity and ran into a nearby building. It was the Baby Magnum’s maintenance facility.

The maintenance soldiers working inside those thick walls may not have understood the gravity of the situation.

But once they saw the storm of bugs covering the windows and sounding like heavy raindrops, the fear finally caught up to them.

They quickly sealed all the entrances, but a few had gotten inside. They quickly crushed those and finally breathed a sigh of relief.

The old maintenance lady clicked her tongue.

“The radios are cut off. Now we can’t contact the Princess while she tests the Baby Magnum out there.”

“You mean I just missed her!? Why now of all times!?”

The large space meant for the Baby Magnum was oddly empty.

Heivia cursed, but that would not solve anything.

The old lady gathered the maintenance soldiers and started gathering some equipment.

They were probably making some kind of weapon to fight back.

But what would be any use against such a large swarm of bugs? Heivia looked out one of the relatively unaffected windows and saw a pillar of fire. Someone had probably made an impromptu flamethrower out of a fuel vehicle, but they were hopelessly outnumbered. They would be roasting quite a few of them, but dozens as many flew in to swallow up those people. Some of them flew to the humans while still burning, as if to take the soldiers out with them.

“What do we do? What are we supposed to do about this?”

“We just have to figure something out on our own. C’mon, if you’re gonna be useless, at least get out of the way of our work.”

Heivia looked dubiously back at the old lady. The threat of the bugs was one thing, but that old lady was oddly calm after seeing such a hopeless scene.

The old lady appeared to be gathering nonlethal gas grenades used for riot suppression.

“Listen, our opponent is outdoors! We won’t be able to kill them without one hell of a powerful smokescreen! These are made to be safe, but a few small adjustments and we can turn them into a powerful insecticide. Our resources are limited, so I can only show you how once. Anyone who screws it up and wastes one will be tied up outside as bug-food!!”

Insecticide was the best way of killing insects.

The answer was so obvious that Heivia actually laughed.

He had been too overwhelmed to even reach that most obvious answer.

And when they were only up against small bugs.

“Will that really work?”

“That depends on the wind. If we’re lucky, it’ll cover almost the entire maintenance base in a smokescreen.”

The old lady covered her nose and mouth with a scarf and quickly manipulated the strong-smelling chemical.

“You get ready for dealing with things afterwards. We have to do something about the bugs to rescue the soldiers collapsing out there, but we’re using a smokescreen of insecticide. That’s harmful to humans too, so we need to drag the victims out of there and perform first aid as soon as the bugs are dead. You remember your rescue training, right? Let’s get started!!”

They did nothing wrong.

The insecticide using nonlethal gas grenades was a more effective weapon than bullets or knives and they showed commendable courage for opening the doors protecting them to aim the gas grenade launchers outside to rescue the soldiers still out there.

But there was one ominous factor out there: the impromptu flamethrower using a fuel vehicle.

Gas grenades and hairspray were made pretty much the same. They used pressurized gas to spray out the liquid inside as an aerosol. A number of gases could be used, but due to environmental concerns, propane gas had become more common than Freon or carbon dioxide.

And thus, the gas grenades would burn.

As soon as it made contact with the flamethrower's flames, the smokescreen meant to rescue them all detonated and created a sea of flames.

Part 7

“Gyah!!”

Quenser flinched back from the intense wave of heat and tried to flee back inside.

But the sole of Frolaytia’s boot kicked him in the back and pushed him back outside.

“We can’t turn back now! If the leader slows down, the odds of survival for everyone following you drops!! You started this, so get going, Quenser!!”

“Dammit! What the hell is going on!?”

Half in desperation, Quenser ran out into the outside world that reeked of gasoline.

There was nothing but fire as far as the eye could see. The heat was like a solid wall and he thought it would burn his hair away. Black smoke caught in his throat. On top of that, the swarm of crickets had not been wiped out. They broke through the screen of flames and smoke to rush toward this new “food”.

Sharp pain reached him through his uniform and the duct tape, but not because he was being bitten. It was the pain of them flying into him. He knew that, but a strange sweat still covered him and he felt like they were eating him to the bone. The source of the pain also seemed to be gradually shifting.

A dull vibration reached him from behind. He could not look back because it would throw off his sense of direction, but the detention barracks had probably toppled over. There was no going back. There were no safe walls or doors. He could only continue forward.

(My compass! The compass in my hand! I need to calculate the distance using my steps…)

He looked down at his hand to shake off the nightmare around him.

Someone was lying on the ground nearby and he tripped over them.

“Wah, wah! Waaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhhhh!!”

He lost his compass as he tripped and he had no way to search for it with the low visibility. And who had that been? Had the explosion taken them out or had they been eaten by the bugs? Just what was going on here?

His mind started going blank with panic, but then someone grabbed his arm and tugged him forward.

It was Eric from the Faith Organization.

“It’s okay. We’ll be okay!! If we make it eight hundred meters southeast we can get through this, right!? I have a compass! We can survive together!!”

“W-wahh, wahhhh!”

“It’s too late for that guy back there. He isn’t moving. But we’re alive, so we have to survive this!!”

Only after Eric grabbed his shoulders and yelled into his face did Quenser regain his focus on reality.

He shook his head and spoke while covered in bugs.

“Sorry. Let’s go. Let’s survive this.”

“That’s more like it!!”

Eric slapped him on the back to urge him onward. The Legitimacy Kingdom and Faith Organization shared a compass to slowly advance.

“What happened to Skuld? Why are you alone!?”

“Don’t look back! We got separated almost immediately. I’m worried about her too, but we can’t afford to lose our sense of direction. We can only pray that the others are heading this way too!!”

It was like a journey through hell.

There was nothing but black bugs and red flames as far as the eye could see. Eight hundred meters to the southeast was the shortest distance, but it was all over if they found a wall of flames in their way. They could not let themselves be enveloped in flames, but they also could not hope to bypass the flames with so little visibility. If they tried, they would lose their sense of direction and lose track of where their destination was.

They were nearly praying as they walked.

The pain of the crickets striking their bodies forced them to continue focusing on reality.

They could not keep up even the mental capacity necessary to think about time, distance, direction, or even the distinction between enemy and ally. Their minds went so maddeningly blank that they nearly forgot their own names. They became machines that simply moved their legs in silence.

Even so, they made it.

Without running into any walls of flames, their hands reached the distant storage building's wall.

"We did it…"

Even in the middle of hell, Quenser smiled.

"We did it, goddammit!! We've finally arrived!!"

They had apparently been near the head of the group, so they grabbed the doorknob for the human entrance with bugs still covering their bodies. Fortunately, they did not find that someone else had already taken refuge there and locked the door. It opened like normal and they poured inside.

Frolaytia and Elfily arrived together.

There was still no sign of Skuld, the Pilot Elite who had been with them when they had left.

“Hurry,” said Elfily. “Hurry up and shut the door. This is all meaningless if the crickets get inside!!”’

Quenser turned around in shock, but the eyes behind her glasses were serious.

“We can’t! We can’t do that, Miss Elfily! There are still Faith Organization prisoners out there. They risked their lives to reach this building! If we shut them out, they’ll all die!! We’d be betraying them after convincing them to do this!”

“The same fate awaits them if the building fills with crickets. They can’t escape hell whether they arrive or not, so shutting the door is the only option!!”

“We can’t…”

“They would have shut us out if the roles were reversed. We just happened to get here first. That’s all this is. Or am I wrong!? Do you have some proof that they would have let us in!?”

“I don’t care if they would or not!!”

“Shut the door, Quenser Barbotage.”

The student heard a quiet metallic sound as Elfily pulled a handgun from her waist and aimed it at his face.

Still, he shook his head.

“Shut the door, Quenser!!”

She shouted at him, but he pressed his back against the open door. Even if she shot him, he would collapse against the door and continue to hold it open.

Just as she clearly clicked her tongue, the second group arrived.

Then the third and the fourth.

As the number of Faith Organization soldiers grew, Elfily lost her influence. She would be unable to deal with all of them even if she

fired every bullet she had on hand.

And of course, plenty of bugs flew in with the people.

There were more than two hundred people in all.

After grabbing Skuld's arm and pulling her in last, Eric shouted from within the bugs.

"Is that everyone? Okay! Close it, Quenser!!"

"Is everyone accounted for!?"

"Yes! It really is okay! I'm not lying!! So close it!!"

He shut the door with his entire body.

A deluge of bell-like chirping filled the building. More than just a few hundred had gotten inside. The number covering the floor and walls clearly reached quadruple digits. Normally, this would mean the building was contaminated and far from safe.

But that was not the case.

"Huh? They aren't attacking us?"

Elfily looked confused as she kept her gun in her hand and breathed heavily.

Frolaytia explained as she observed the situation.

"These are 'brazen bugs'. They ignore the normal pyramid structure to attack even large beasts when there are hundreds of thousands of them. …But if there aren't that many, they lose their advantage and return to being obedient bugs."

This was just like the cricket Quenser had seen in the duct.

It had been so close by, but it had only sat there chirping. Without a giant swarm, they would not try to bite people.

Meaning…

“Split them up and they’re just bugs.”

Quenser slowly stood up.

“They don’t stand a chance against us now.”

Part 8

The insect extermination began.

It was officially to ensure the safety of the storage building, but was that really why? As they crushed the nearly defenseless bugs with their boots or with mops, they may really have been releasing their built up frustrations.

They did not feel sorry for the bugs or find the action unpleasant.

Their hearts had entirely numbed over.

“Goddammit! Goddammit goddammit goddammit!!”

As he crushed them underfoot, Quenser’s chest filled with a hopeless lethargy and emptiness.

With an opponent that fought back and would try to eat him if he let his guard down, he would have been able to slaughter them without issue. But these crickets were different. They just stood on the floor, stared up at him with emotionless eyes, and vibrated their wings to create the clear bell-like chirping. It felt like they were placing all the blame on the rampaging humans.

He started feeling silly going along with it, so he moved away from the commotion and leaned against a wall without any bugs on it.

He removed the towel from his mouth and nose.

“What the hell is this…?”

He slid down to a seated position.

Even with the sea of flames outside, the swarm showed no sign of being wiped out. And yet having the Baby Magnum work toward exterminating them would only blow the maintenance base to smithereens. Could they open the door and lure small groups of them in at a time to squish them like they were now? How many days would that take to finish? The Legitimacy Kingdom soldiers

still outside would be eaten to the bone by then and Quenser's group had no food or water. They could not live in this storage building forever.

So what could they do?

How were they supposed to survive this?

"Quenser."

That was when Eric of the Faith Organization spoke to him. Quenser slowly looked up and then looked puzzled. Eric was not alone. He was gently guiding Pilot Elite Skuld by the hand like an escort at a dinner party.

"Saint Skuld wishes to discuss something with you," said Eric. "She said she could trust you."

"Skuld did? What do you want?"

He honestly did not think they had much of a connection. They had spoken a bit in the detention barracks, but they had been enemies during the battle the night before and she would not know he had been listening to her interrogation through the one-way mirror.

But she seemed to see things differently.

"You hold a special position among the Legitimacy Kingdom," explained Eric. "Being a student instead of a soldier definitely helps. To be honest, I'd prefer to use you as a point of contact than those young women."

"I see. So what is this about?"

"This."

Skuld casually held her hand.

One of the bell crickets was clinging to the gentle curve of her palm.

"Wah!!"

“It’s okay. This one won’t bite anymore.”

Skuld remained calm and gave the chirping insect an emotionless look.

“There’s something that bothers me about these bell crickets.”

“Something that bothers you?”

“I’ve seen them before.”

At first, Quenser did not know what she meant. Insects were not exactly rare. The issue here was the ridiculous number of them.

But Skuld had more to say.

“These are not naturally occurring bugs.”

“What?”

“The Faith Organization has a project known as Draupnir. Do you know what that is?”

“?”

Quenser tilted his head, so Eric answered for him with a bitter smile.

“It’s a story from Norse mythology. It’s a gold bracelet owned by the god Odin and it increases in number after a set number of days. Just like the biscuits in that Island Nation nursery rhyme. So no matter how much money Odin spends, he will always have more. It’s a symbol of wealth.”

“Our Draupnir project was meant to secure a large amount of food,” explained Skuld. “The Objects stand out the most, but food is a necessary part of war, right? If we could develop a food source that would never run out, don’t you think we could wage war much more easily?”

“Hold on…”

At first, the bell crickets did not seem to have anything to do with a project to develop a food source, but if he removed all of his presuppositions…

“Hold on!! Are you saying these crickets are your food source!?”

“Apparently so,” said Eric. “I’ve only heard rumors, but bugs are near the bottom of the food chain and they can multiply endlessly in the right environment. Apparently some old guys in a lab were all excited about it being a more efficient source of protein than raising cattle or pigs.”

He made it sound like some theoretical issue, but then Skuld cut in.

“Oh? Aren’t the fries the most popular dish among the infantry berserkers? What do you think they squish up to shape into those?”

“G-gweeehhh!!!???”

Eric faced the other way and spewed some noises that will be omitted here.

Skuld remained calm.

“Draupnir is a genetically modified food insect and I believe that is what these are. For one thing, there are no bell crickets in the Antsiranana District’s Experimental Battlefield Madagascar. They should only be found in the Island Nation and Asia.”

“Frolaytia did say she’s seen them in a pet shop that specialized in the Island Nation.”

It was possible there were nocturnal chirping bugs on this island and an amateur might not be able to tell them apart, but that changed when they were clearly bell crickets.

Unnatural insects had been brought to an unnatural place.

Had it all been intentional?

“So they’ve been genetically modified to breed like crazy and never run out no matter how many you eat?” groaned Quenser. “I did

hear crickets chirping all over the place last night. Had they already started multiplying then?"

"Let me make one thing clear. The Faith Organization only sees Draupnir as a project to provide the soldiers with food. I swear to you that they were not developed for use as a biological weapon."

"I understand that. These are far too difficult to control to use them like that. We just have to pray your higher ups don't see what happened here as a success." Quenser wiped the sweat from his brow. "But this has given me some hope."

"?"

"Skuld, you said these bell crickets have had their genes messed with, right? That's fine, but do you know how that was done?"

"Only in general. I think a few of their chromosomes were intentionally damaged with chemicals and then they were crossbred for generation after generation. In a way, they had their genes damaged."

"In other words, the abnormal level of breeding and growth came from damage to their chromosomes?"

"What about it?"

"It's simple. The simpler a creature's structure, the more easily their genes change due to outside stimuli. It's enough for the flu to be different every year. And between humans and bugs, the bugs are much more easily affected."

Quenser paused for a beat.

"These Draupnir are easily-altered bugs to begin with and their genes will be even more unstable after the intentional damage done to them. That means we just need one last push. If we damage the chromosomes of these killer crickets, we might be able to wipe them all out as their cells break down."

"But how?"

“There are a few ways to alter genes. As you said, the easiest and most effective method is getting some help from chemicals, but you can also use UV, IR, coal tar, or asbestos. I think the solvent used for printing would work too. Really, just anything that’s been labelled carcinogenic should work.”

“Printing solvent? So what about Object paint?”

“They wouldn’t let our Elite Princess anywhere near something dangerous like that. Plus there’s something else that’s even more common.”

“Like what?”

“Extremely high-power microwaves. If we send out radar waves at max levels, we can exterminate all of the crickets swarming the maintenance base.”

Part 9

After they suggested their plan, Frolaytia created a map of the maintenance base zone using the tools and cans in the storage building. Normally that would not be something to show the Faith Organization POWs, but the base zone was made of vehicles and could thus be freely rearranged. If they did things right, this would not reveal any critical information.

“It’s nearby. The control tower and radar facility are only fifty meters west of here. Head there and we can send out high power radar waves just as Quenser suggested.”

They knew what they had to do.

Then something strange happened.

No one had been moving in the slightest, but as soon as Quenser raised his hand, Skuld did as well. And she was not the only one. Eric and Elfily did too.

“If Saint Skuld is heading out there, of course I am too.”

“The people suffering out there are Legitimacy Kingdom soldiers. We have to do something.”

Finally, more and more hands were raised by Faith Organization soldiers who Quenser did not know or recognize. He realized this was never going to end if he did not put a stop to it himself.

“Okay, okay!! We’ll be going, so the rest of you wait here. We wouldn’t get the work done any faster even if we all went!”

They once more covered their mouth and nose with towels and used duct tape to close up any part of their clothing the bugs could get in through. That did not take much for Skuld whose skintight special suit already covered her entire body.

“Then let’s go. Close the door behind us as soon as we’re out.”

Their march through hell began anew.

Everywhere they looked, they only saw bugs, bugs, bugs!! The sea of flames was still burning just as strong, so the bell crickets were flying around like sparks as they themselves burned. They nearly lost track of distance and direction when faced with the overwhelming sight, but they desperately put up with the pain and supported each other's bodies as they relied on their compasses to take one step at a time.

A mere fifty meters felt like it took years off their lives.

Quenser was gasping for breath by the time he placed his hands on the control tower's wall. Technically, it was the giant tire of the vehicle at its base. He felt along to circle around it in search of the stairs up into the control tower.

And then…

"?"

Suddenly, the reliable feeling of the tire vanished.

The visibility was almost down to zero, but when he strained his eyes, he saw the tire floating upwards, despite being taller than he was.

No, it was not floating.

"Waaah!? I-it's falling! It's falling over!!"

"Move away, Quenser!!"

An arm that likely belonged to Eric pulled him back just as the air was stirred up. A gust of wind caused by great pressure briefly blew away the black smoke and crickets. The screen blocking their view was split apart as if by a giant's sword.

What had caused this was obvious.

It was the same as the detention barracks they had come from. A few of the tires had been eaten through and the weight distribution

had collapsed, causing a chain reaction of bursting tires. Then the building had been unable to maintain its balance. And since this was a control tower rising toward the sky, its center of gravity was higher up, making it easier to lose balance. It fell over all at once.

A deafening roar and tons of dust scattered out, blowing away the flying insects.

“Ahh.” Elfily cried out in despair. “The control tower! The radar! Now we can’t give it our commands. They machinery inside must have been smashed to pieces!!”

The swarm of crickets filled the empty space and the world became hopelessly closed off once more.

“…!!”

Even so, Quenser clenched his teeth and walked over to the collapsed control tower. He felt the sharp pain of the insects tackling him and they covered his body, but he could not give up now. He had no idea how many soldiers were collapsed across the base. He could not calculate how many lives were depending on his decision here. He could not just give up and head back.

“Dammit…”

A cricket flew into one of his eyes, narrowing his vision. A dull pain stabbed deep into his brain.

“Goddammiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiit!!”

He managed to climb inside through a broken window. There were already tons of bugs inside. The bloody soldiers groaning in pain had likely been the ones working inside when the tower collapsed. There were countless bugs covering their bodies, but pulling them off one at a time would be meaningless now.

Quenser looked around the smashed-up room and approached what looked like a radar screen.

“Ahh…”

He reached for it, but Skuld, who had to know more about radars than him, shook her head.

“The display isn’t right. In fact, it’s completely dead. I don’t know if it was the impact of the fall or the crickets chewing through the wiring, but this radar is useless.”

That was the last thing he had wanted to hear.

As the world grew dark before his eyes, he grabbed a nearby microphone. He was almost drowning in a sea of bugs, but he managed to force out a voice.

“Control to Baby Magnum, control to Baby Magnum …Can you hear me, Princess? If you can, then help us!!”

“What will this accomplish?” groaned Eric who was similarly buried in bugs. “No one can help us even if we do get an SOS out. Firing an Object’s cannons will just turn us to mincemeat.”

But Quenser viewed things differently.

This was not just a desperate shot in the dark.

He gave his answer as Skuld looked puzzled next to him.

“It never had to be *this* radar that we used. As long as I had communications equipment powerful enough to break through this swarm, I could ask the Princess for help. Isn’t that right?”

He looked to Skuld as if he were confirming a perfectly normal fact.

“Objects are covered in weapons, so their radars have to be even more powerful than the base’s!!”

Part 10

There was no light and there was no sound.

The Baby Magnum simply scattered powerful radar waves in every direction. Soon thereafter, the tens or even hundreds of thousands of bell crickets fell to the ground like their power switch had been flipped.

Part 11

Quenser gasped for breath while tearing the duct tape from his body.

Exterminating all those bugs was not the end of this. First they had to rescue the injured. Then they had to report on the damage caused by collapsed buildings and chewed-through wiring. They also had to extinguish the sea of flames. And if they did not dispose of the bug corpses littering the base, they could easily become a hotbed of disease.

A few of the prisoners did not show up when they were counted.

They had probably used the commotion to escape and were currently running through the humid jungle. If the Faith Organization learned about the damage here, they could make another attack with the Trinity Style piloted by Urd or Verdandi.

“Now I’m nervous,” he said without thinking.

“Yes,” replied the person next to him.

It was not the Princess or Heivia.

Faith Organization Pilot Elite Skuld sat on the ground there.

“But this was always going to happen. Urd and Verdandi will never forgive me. Even if I tried to escape this island, they would attack at some point along the way.”

“…”

“What is it?”

“Nothing really.” Quenser shook his head. “I just realized you didn’t run off is all. It does seem some of the prisoners fled into the jungle.”

“We have no idea if those were the only Draupnir around here.

Besides, they have a base to return to while I'm being hunted by my own people. Frankly, I'm amazed that the people like Eric decided to stay."

"I see."

Quenser took another breath.

It had been a horrible day since morning, but this seemed to signal the end of that.

"Then we're in this together. Once again, it's nice to meet you."

"…"

Skuld stared at the proffered hand in shock, but then she hesitantly reached out her own hand and grabbed it.

Part 12

Panting breaths filled the jungle.

They were carelessly rustling through the underbrush, but they did not notice they were leaving plenty of hints for any pursuers. They just wanted to get away from the Legitimacy Kingdom maintenance base as quickly as possible and then return to the Faith Organization base. That was the only thing on their minds.

They were optimistic.

They had only been captured because the Norn had retreated without fighting in the very, very end. They had been left behind. The military would feel indebted to them for that and they could provide useful information on the damage to the Legitimacy Kingdom. They were confident they would be warmly welcomed back instead of judged as fools who could not even make a suicide attack.

If a surprise attack was made on the maintenance base zone, the prisoners like Skuld and Eric might be killed too, but these soldiers cared about their own wellbeing first and foremost.

Yes, they were optimistic.

“…!? Hey, what are you doing? Don’t stop! You’re in the lead, aren’t you!? What’s the holdup!?”

“No, wait. Be quiet…”

They came to a stop and strained their ears.

Even their own breathing seemed in the way.

And soon, they knew they were not just hearing things.

They heard clear chirping.

It was the very last sound they had wanted to hear.

Unpleasant sweat poured from their bodies and they just about started hyperventilating, but they still slowly, slowly turned around as if an invisible hand held their heads.

And there they saw…

Chapter 4

Part 1

The Battlefield Country of the Antsiranana District was also known as Experimental Battlefield Madagascar.

Baobab trees known to live for more than 5000 years rose from the vast land that was dyed orange in the evening sunlight. The ground was crawling with insects found nowhere else in the world, but few of the soldiers realized their value.

They were inside the Faith Organization's maintenance base zone.

Several large military vehicles were surrounded by barbed wire barricades. Most of their base was covered by giant thick tents that would have looked more at home at a circus. Some of them were even larger than a school building.

But their maintenance base was made from more than just cutting-edge scientific rapid-response materials.

"Getting irritable is not going to improve the situation."

That gentle comment came from a girl of about 18 who wore a skintight green special suit with a loose cloth wrapped around it like a swimsuit to avoid exposing the most important parts. Her long golden hair was bound in a single braid which increased her overall gentle atmosphere.

She was one of the three sisters who piloted the Faith Organization's Second Generation Norn.

Her name was Urd Silent-Third.

She had set up a folding chair, table, parasol, and spot cooler on the orange wasteland and a variety of fruits were lined up on the table. The coconuts, mangoes, bananas, and sugarcane were normal enough, but the fon'omby[1] and tamarind were more unusual.

They seemed to be local produce, but they would not have simply been bought at the market. Pilot Elites single-handedly influenced the outcomes of modern wars, so they were too valuable for that. To ensure a foreign spy had not mixed in some poison, the lowly soldiers would have gone to a lot of effort to procure them.

Another girl sighed. She had a harsh look to her eyes and her similarly blonde hair was crudely tied back into twintails. Instead of taking the seat her older sister had prepared for her, she crossed her

arms and leaned against the thick stone wall.

Her name was Verdandi Silent-Third.

That girl of about 16 was also one of the Norn's Elites.

If all three sisters had been together, it would have been clear that they all used the exact same hair bands.

"Is life as a vegetarian really that much fun?"

"A glance inside the bug cage should tell you what the base's burgers and fries are made from."

But despite that gentle comment, Verdandi took a bite of the burger she held in its wrapper.

Her food was also a special provision for the Pilot Elite, so it was a 100% pure beef patty, unlike the normal ones on base. However, the normal soldiers were unaware of the "bug cage", so there was no jealousy there.

The second sister was not leaning up against one of the school-sized tents the Faith Organization had prepared. Instead, it was the kind of cathedral that one could find anywhere in a European safe country, but its majesty was not lost in Africa. And that was not the only building; there were enough of them to qualify as a small village. Or perhaps it would be better to say they had chosen to build their maintenance base alongside the remains of a village.

The term "Africa" probably brings a great variety of things to mind, but these European-style buildings were surprisingly common. There were historical reasons for that, but the familiar environment was probably a comfort for the people deployed here from afar. There was no fear of morale dropping for a reason as silly as homesickness.

Verdandi looked at the burger she had bitten into.

"Skuld had no trouble eating those things."

"I think it had more to do with how she enjoyed eating alongside

the normal soldiers. That little sister of ours has always prioritized what satisfies her heart over her body."

"…"

The two sisters fell silent as they thought about the missing third sister.

And then they both resumed speaking.

"…We can't just leave her out there."

"No. And the higher ups will know how dangerous that would be. That is why I am not letting my irritation keep me from eating. Stress can influence our condition and that could influence this clean war."

"So do you think we can make it in time?"

"Of course."

Urd smiled.

With a sticky sound, she stabbed her fork into a ripe slice of fruit.

"If the alternative is allowing Skuld to escape to a foreign safe country, we must kill her here. No matter what. On that we agree."

Part 2

The twilight burned red.

The Legitimacy Kingdom soldiers had gathered outside and they were chatting curiously.

“Why is the major sitting on top of Quenser and beating him?”

“Because she found out he was making honeycomb toffee in secret.”

“Sugar is one thing, but where did he get the baking soda? Is there a hot spring around here?”

“He apparently took apart a fire extinguisher to get at the foaming agent.”

“If you make candy, she’ll climb on top of you with that tight skirt? C’mon, hit me too!!”

Meanwhile, busty silver-haired Frolaytia must have wanted to take a break because she tossed Quenser over toward the other soldiers.

“Sorry about that distraction. Everyone line back up.”

The pre-mission briefing was beginning.

“Our satellite has detected the Trinity Style starting to move.”

The soldiers were gathered outside rather than in the usual briefing room. That meant there had not been enough available indoor space for the briefing. They had yet to recover from the damage done by the genetically modified insects.

The enemy was approaching while their equipment was malfunctioning and that was likely intentional on the enemy’s part.

“It will attack soon, but we are not yet ready to withdraw. At this rate, we would be hit as we tried to leave. Sending out the Baby Magnum and coming up with a countermeasure against the Trinity

Style is looking like the more realistic option."

As the rows of soldiers listened, Heivia muttered a complaint next to Quenser.

"And what are puny soldiers like us supposed to do? Go jack off in our bunks until the Princess wins?"

"I heard that, Heivia. And I have the perfect job for a volunteer hero who wants to stand out."

"Why'd you have to say something!? Now we're all being sent to the front line!!"

Frolaytia ignored the soldiers ganging up on Heivia and continued with the briefing.

"Currently, the Trinity Style's combat ability is an unknown. The Princess had trouble last time, but that was partially due to it making a surprise attack after pretending to be defeated. However, we can't be too optimistic. We have no idea what will happen in a fair one-on-one battle. It might be an easy victory and it might be a harsh battle. If we knew how we would fare, we could decide how much distance to keep between us, but we don't know anything. We simply have too little information, so we have to assume this is the most dangerous situation. It's 50/50…either side could win."

The busy commander inhaled some smoke from her kiseru.

"Furthermore, the Trinity Style is a Second Generation made from small work robots that allow it to use entirely different shapes, main cannons, propulsion devices, and strategies. The thickness of its armor and most damage can be changed or repaired by shifting the position of those robots. …They're sure to create a situation we can't read and then move in to wear us down. The Faith Organization was able to put together a strategy in advance while we have to adlib, so they have a major advantage. Do you understand now that we can't rest easy and leave this to the Princess?"

But Quenser hesitantly raised his hand because he did not want to

set foot on the battlefield.

“But what can flesh-and-blood soldiers do? And I’m pretty sure the Trinity Style’s acoustic scans will locate anyone who’s hiding.”

“Does that mean we have to change back into those athlete’s foot suits!? What a pain the ass!!”

“Anyone without a death wish, listen up.” Frolaytia sounded indifferent. “I’ll start with your objective. The biggest problem in the Trinity Style battle is the changes to its armor and armaments. We are constantly monitoring it by satellite, but we need as many information sources as possible. You will infiltrate the battlefield and use various cameras and sensors to constantly scan the Trinity Style in real time to gather data on its shape, abilities, and armor. That data will be sent to the Princess so she can fire her main cannons at the thinnest point.”

She used her kiseru to point at the map on the whiteboard.

“This time, the Objects will be firing at each other from across a giant river. Large bodies of water are the enemy of static electricity systems, so that will function as a barricade. But that’s only true if it is using static electricity. If the Dvergr secretly rearrange to an air cushion system, it might suddenly cross the river. That is another reason to continue scanning and sending out the data. Static electricity and air cushions both have their unique traits and weaknesses. If we know its movable range, it shouldn’t be difficult for the Princess to predict its next move and fire her main cannon where it will be next.”

“Wow, setting up hidden cameras gets us praised as heroes now? Everything I thought I knew is crumbling away. War sure is scary. …But I think we’ll get more than a slap if their goddess notices.”

Frolaytia responded to Heivia while placing her kiseru back in her mouth.

“You don’t need to worry about the anti-personnel acoustic sensors this time. This will be an all-out battle between the Princess and the Trinity Style, so the entire area will be a vortex of explosive blasts.

It’s going to be worse than a fireworks show, so the precision of those acoustic sensors is sure to drop and you can also set up plenty of those disturbance speakers that worked so well last time.”

“And the real reason for that?”

“I said this would be an all-out battle, right? A small infiltration team was one thing, but we don’t have enough soundproofed suits for all of our infantry. Unfortunately, the budgets for these clean wars are heavily biased toward the Objects.”

In other words, this had less to do with a safer situation and more to do with a cobbled-together way of making up for insufficient equipment. Quenser and the others only grew more disheartened.

“By the way, do we have a guess as to which form the Trinity Style will use?”

“That is what we need to interrogate Skuld Silent-Third about. Quenser, you come with me. You seem to have earned the POWs’ trust since the bug panic, so they might have a looser tongue around you than a strict intelligence officer.”

Part 3

“I don’t know.”

Quenser pressed his forehead against the table when that was the very first thing she said.

The student and Skuld were not speaking in specialized detention barracks meant to hold war criminals and POWs. That facility had collapsed during the attack by the genetically modified Draupnir insects, so the infantry barracks had been divided in two with the Faith Organization occupying one half. They had of course added locks to the doors and welded scrap materials to the windows to prevent the POWs from escaping.

As Quenser slumped down, the twintail girl was lying directly on the table.

Not only that, but she wore no clothes and only had a white sheet covering her.

“How am I supposed to know what exactly the Norn will try to do? I mean, there are two other Elites besides me and-…what is it?”

“…”

Quenser kept his head pressed against the edge of the table and glanced to the side. The green special suit, boots, and gloves were all draped over the back of a nearby chair.

After a moment, she finally caught on.

“Is this any time to be getting distracted?”

“It’s kind of hard not to.”

“It is my right as a POW to receive the treatment necessary to for my vital fine-tuning as an Elite.”

“Well, yeah. But still…”

“And in my case, that means this.”

As the twintail girl lay face down below the sheet, she tapped at the corner of the table.

A few aroma candle containers sat there.

The music player situated on a small stand was playing highly soothing environmental music at a moderate volume.

Perhaps to reap the benefit of negative ions, there were even pots with mossy plants growing inside.

Her pillow was small but made from an expensive-looking low-resilience material.

And this riddle led Quenser to a certain answer.

“Come to think of it, the Trinity Style’s cockpit was full of sleep products too, wasn’t it?”

“Honestly, I was pretty sure you wouldn’t have any of it, so I wrote down everything I could think of. But look at all this. You had pretty much all of it. I’m not sure if that means you’re well-prepared or overrun by personal items.”

Curse that busty commander. What kind of a luxurious life are you living? wondered Quenser as a grinding sound came from his mouth.

“It’s not so much about sleeping though. It’s really about using the hallucinations seen on the verge of falling asleep.”

“Oh, you mean that thing where you can easily have a mystical experience by playing the right kinds of low frequency noise?”

He thought that sounded exactly like something the Faith Organization would do. Then again…

“But why are you naked?”

“Unfortunately, I can’t make that tightrope walk without the optimum performance. I can’t be awake and I can’t fall asleep

either.”

But Quenser had to question whether he was really close enough to Skuld for her to let him approach while she was so defenseless. He had protected her from the Trinity Style before and maybe the bug panic had been the final push.

The battlefield student coolly analyzed the situation.

(Hm. Whatever the case, a naked girl is a wonderful thing. Hmm!! It feels something like waiting to remove the ribbon from a present, but I am 100% okay with that!)

“?”

“Now, don’t worry about me. Don’t worry about me at all and continue! If it’s a humanitarian thing, I guess it can’t be helped! Yes, if you don’t do this, you’d probably get a migraine, lose your appetite, or feel sick!! So we have no choice in the matter!!”

Quenser stared at the smooth curves visible through the sheet and did his best to activate any latent clairvoyant powers he might have, but Skuld got back on topic with a blank sleepy look in her eyes.

“So, um, where was I? …Mumble, mumble… Oh, right, right. The Norn has two Elites besides me. Urd and Verdandi. The distance they fight from and the way they attack are completely different.”

“…The way they attack?”

“Urd fires a thorough barrage to cut off her enemy’s escape in something like a chess problem. Verdandi goes for a one-hit kill and never wastes a shot. Completely different, right?”

“Wow…”

“Urd prefers long-range attacks because she focuses on taking no damage while Verdandi prefers close-range attacks because she tries to finish off her target as quickly as possible to reduce the overall damage. But even that is only the standard. It’s possible they will move in close while pretending to be Verdandi only to attack with

Urd's tactics."

That difficulty to predict worked to the Trinity Style's advantage. A battle began before the actual fighting did, but this Object destroyed any pre-battle preparation and forced its enemies to adlib. Just as Frolaytia had said.

(But this time the battle is divided by a large river. If the Princess can use that to keep her distance and continue fighting, she can seal off the close-range attacks. That might just draw out Urd who prefers the long-range.)

"Skuld. Tell me how exactly Urd fights. Long-range battles can take a lot of different forms, right?"

"Chemical warfare."

Quenser initially had trouble comprehending what the twintail girl said.

But as he repeated it under his breath, he grew pale.

"Chemical…warfare?"

The term was enough to distract him from the sheet-covered feast before his eyes.

It seemed to linger on his tongue.

Skuld must have felt she misspoke because she clarified.

"Oh, I'm not talking about poison gas or anything like that. Although it is possible it might produce some gas as a side effect."

Skuld rolled over under the sheet.

She was now facing up and the curves around her chest were especially emphasized.

Plus, the sheet nearly pulled back from certain areas as she turned, so Quenser's focus grew to more than 400% of normal. He felt like he was going to blast off into space at this rate.

“The Trinity Style’s main cannon is basically a laser space elevator tilted on its side. Urd’s container-style shells tend to contain various chemicals.”

Quenser replied coolly.

“When you say chemicals…you don’t mean an anti-personnel gas weapon, do you?”

“No matter how large the scale is, Object armor is still essentially special steel. And there are a variety of chemicals that can dissolve or damage steel, right? Sulfuric acid, aqua regia, liquid nitrogen, aluminum and iron oxide, etc.”

“…”

This was different from railguns or coilguns that punched through with overwhelming mass or kinetic energy.

Nor did it burn through with tremendous heat like laser beams or low-stability plasma cannons.

It used a chemical reaction.

It cut through the Object armor using a chemical approach.

“My sister Urd is an expert at that. She doesn’t just fire a chemical-filled container; she sometimes fires several containers to mix them directly on the battlefield. The Capitalist Corporations fearfully named it the murder cocktail strategy. Yawwwwn…”

She must have been growing drowsy because Skuld yawned and twisted her body. This stuck a full bare leg out in front of Quenser’s eyes. The student debated whether to lightly nibble at the thigh or to see how far up to the base of the leg he could see, but he made the mistake of hesitating too long and failing to do either before the bare leg was pulled back inside the sheet.

With a smile on his face and tears in his heart, Quenser replied with a cool voice.

“That doesn’t sound good… Even if it isn’t meant for flesh-and-

blood soldiers, she'll be firing a bunch of sulfuric acid around and the dissolving metal will produce chemical smoke."

"Even if Urd isn't after them, you should probably have your infantry prepare some chemical warfare defenses."

But could they do that?

They already knew they lacked enough soundproofed suits for everyone. A small team would be one thing, but did they really have enough special equipment for a group of hundreds?

(The gas mask filters use activated charcoal, right? Maybe we should take apart some deodorant and try to figure something out.)

He made a mental note of that and Skuld made a comment.

"You seem confident."

"Does this tearful face really look confident?"

"It does."

The twintail girl answered his joke while squirming below the white sheet.

"I honestly thought you would line up the Faith Organization POWs on the front line, aim machineguns at us from behind, and order us to charge. No, it isn't just that. When the detention barracks were destroyed, you didn't build some fences outside and keep us there like farm animals. Giving up your own living space isn't normal."

"There are two major reasons for that. Do you know what they are, Skuld?"

"?"

"First, soldiers who are being forced to fight are useless. And if we carelessly sent the Faith Organization soldiers in front of the Trinity Style, it would probably blow up only our armored trucks to bring you all back to your unit. Plus, an infantry charge isn't going to change anything here. We have to infiltrate the front line, so a

machinegun induced charge would be meaningless."

"What's the second reason?"

Quenser grinned at that.

"It's about our barracks. We're actually quite thankful for that one. After all, we're all crammed in together due to the reduced space. The guys and girls are normally separated, but now we're all living together! But we have no real choice!! I mean, it's only humane to give the POWs a roof over their heads! Ah hah hah hah hah!!"

An officer like Frolaytia and a Pilot Elite like the Princess had their own private quarters and their defenses was still as strict as ever, but that was a different matter.

And the twintail girl naturally looked at him like he was a dung beetle.

She still looked sleepy, but she grabbed the edges of the sheet and curled up like a human spring roll to protect herself.

"…You're utter trash, aren't you?"

"Bloodline is everything in the Legitimacy Kingdom, so our culture can't exactly reject the act of baby-making. But I guess that might look strange to the Faith Organization and all its strict ideals that ignore our biology. Wait, but isn't Norse Mythology pretty lax about that stuff?"

Quenser did not seem to mind at all.

"Personally, I find it stranger that you're so willing to give us information on the Trinity Style."

"Does it seem so easy that you're starting to suspect a trap?" Skuld sighed with just her head poking out of the sheet. "Didn't I tell you my sisters are going to kill me? If the entire Faith Organization sees it that way, I can't return to the Norn. I don't gain a thing by holding onto its secrets."

"Then are you trying to defect to the Legitimacy Kingdom?"

“It’s hard to say.”

Skuld seemed to be enjoying the situation rather than keeping her cards close to her chest.

But if she really did try to join the Legitimacy Kingdom, the Faith Organization would never allow it. Having information on the Trinity Style leaked to another world power would be especially bad for Urd and Verdandi who had to continue piloting that Object and could not switch to another variety.

So they would kill her, no matter what it took.

It did not matter if she was their blood-related sister.

“I’m expecting a lot from you.”

That was all she said.

One of the world powers that colored the map was after her life and had sent in one of the Objects that had ended the nuclear age. A student like Quenser could not imagine what kinds of feelings were whirling through the girl’s chest.

Part 4

The mission began.

Before the Baby Magnum was sent out, Quenser, Heivia, and the rest of the infantry set out into the orange-dyed wasteland aboard multiple military vehicles.

However, these were not normal armored trucks. There was no thick hose, obvious siren, or crane-like ladder attached to the rectangular body and the color was different, but they had a familiar silhouette. These were the maintenance base zone's damage control firetrucks.

The soldiers clung to the flat roof and even the sides. It looked like the images of trains packed absolutely full.

Quenser was on the roof, but Heivia had failed to secure a spot there and was on the wall.

"This is ridiculous. We're sending out chemical firetrucks now? We're here to fight a war, not provide disaster relief."

"The Trinity Style's elevator main cannon might fire a ton of container shells. Those things are worse than giant Molotov cocktails. And even in this wasteland, chemical incendiary rounds will spread a fire like crazy. We want every chance we can of avoiding being baked to death."

"Either way, these obvious targets will get hit as soon as the battle begins! They'll be blown away by the Object's shells before anything else, and it'll be just like a well-shaken beer!!"

Just as Heivia got heated up, the firetruck drove over a large stone. The vehicle shook violently and the idiot noble shut up. He must have almost fallen off.

And he nervously looked down below.

"And what is this? We're supposed to be using the colossal nuke-

resistant weapon as a shield, so why are we out front? If the Trinity Style fires a shell, we'll be blown to pieces."

"We just have to try to stay positive. If we do die, we won't suffer. Think of it as saving us the cost of anesthetic and you can laugh it off."

As they joked back and forth, Frolaytia contacted them via radio.

"The battle is moving at the Faith Organization's pace this time. We're fortunate to have the giant river between us, but we're still at a disadvantage when it comes to placing our pieces on the board. Simply put, our maintenance base zone is close to the front line. Their top priority will be assassinating Skuld. That goes for the Trinity Style too of course, but make sure they don't use that giant thing's rampage to distract us while they send infantry across the river. If that happens, you all need to fight. Shoot them or hit them with a shovel; I don't care which. Just don't let them get close."

"How has the Trinity Style been crossing the rivers so far?"

"We don't know. Maybe they temporarily dammed the rivers or built makeshift bridges."

Quenser and the others' job was to hide within the battlefield and scan the changeable Trinity Style in real time. By sending that data to the Princess, she could locate and fire on the weakest point.

That meant the infantry could not gather in one place. They had to spread out as much as possible, so the chemical firetrucks would stop here and there while the soldiers set out into the wasteland on foot.

Quenser and the others arrived at a river that looked 100 meters wide.

As far as they could tell with the flame-like evening sun reflecting off the water, it did not seem to be all that deep. That said, it was still enough to stop the Princess's static electricity propulsion device.

When the firetruck stopped alongside the river, Quenser and some

others climbed down. Nearby, a giant vehicle was folded up like an accordion, but then it extended forward with a crane-like sound.

It slowly but surely formed a bridge long enough for a truck to cross the river.

“Since she sent that bridge truck with us, it looks like that busty commander was prepared to send us on quite the exciting field trip.”

“But we only have the one, so they’ll have to swim back if it’s destroyed.”

The two idiots watched the chemical firetrucks cross the river and disappear. Since the battle would take place with the river in between the Objects, they needed more soldiers on the other side if they were to scan the Trinity Style.

And that was of course Faith Organization territory.

“Did you see the rifles the POWs had? They had a long staff-like magazine attached along the side. With that, they can fire 200 times without swapping out for a new one. I don’t want to even think about running across some of them.”

“Yeah, their infantry are called berserkers, right? But didn’t the old lady say the grouping was pretty bad and they’re essentially useless beyond 300 meters?”

“So you think we can push them back with a sniper rifle? Their fear has been deleted, so they’ll just gather together and climb over their comrades’ corpses. And the second we’re within range, all hell will break loose against us. They’ll take us all out with reinforced rifle rounds that can punch through bulletproof armor.”

They could use the river as a natural barrier to keep the Trinity Style back, but if the bridge truck was destroyed, the retreating soldiers would have nowhere to run. The thought of being ordered to infiltrate enemy territory with no guarantee of a way back sent a shudder down their spines.

“I’m glad luck was on our side this time,” commented Quenser.

“Ksshh. Are you sure about that, Quenser?” said Frolaytia over the radio. “The Trinity Style will be stuck at the river, so near the river where you are is sure to have the strongest stench of death.”

“And that’s why it’s the best place to observe the Trinity Style!! Oh, to hell with it! I’ll just have to steal a ton of lucrative tech from that pile of treasure!! Yes, I really was lucky! The goddess of luck is on my side!!”

“Hey, you positive SOB,” interrupted Heivia. “If you really want to survive, you need to do more than pray to some goddess. I’ll give you some of the disturbance speakers, so help us set them up all around here.”

Heivia handed him a bag and all of the soldiers scattered. Once the battle began, they did not want to be anywhere near that noticeable military truck. Even the bridge truck’s driver and crew had likely left and gone to hide somewhere.

And their lives were reliant on the disturbance speakers. A small speaker slightly larger than a baseball was supported by a small tripod and it came with a remote device that sent commands wirelessly.

They spread out the tripods and set up the speakers at 50-100 meter intervals but with some level of randomness.

“Honestly, can’t they scatter these from the air like with landmines?”

“Do that and they’ll figure out what we’re up to right away.”

There was no clock tower on the orange-colored wasteland, so something else had to signal the beginning.

“Here they come,” said Heivia once they had set up all of the disturbance speakers.

One was the Baby Magnum which approached from behind them.

The other was across the river.

Now that they could see it, their lives were reliant on the disturbance speakers. The speakers produced the chirping of insects to mask the sounds of breathing, cartilage, and joints from the soldiers.

From what?

The answer was simple.

Like a trendy lamp, the giant form's propulsion device was shaped like an Island Nation *mitsudomoe* and the main cannon and giant magazine on the left and right were connected by a belt.

Quenser stared at its magnificent form without bothering to use binoculars.

"So we meet again, Trinity Style!!"

Part 5

It was a hellish exchange from the very first shot.

“…!!!???”

Quenser and Heivia dropped everything and dove down onto the orange-dyed wasteland. The Baby Magnum and Trinity Style fired shell after shell from several kilometers apart.

From a distance, it might have looked like a light show.

They used low-stability plasma cannons, laser beams, railguns, coilguns, and rapid-fire beam cannons.

But for the people there, they were like the fingers of death itself.

If one merely stroked their back, they truly would lose their life. Merely being exposed to the tingling shockwaves felt like having years worn off their life.

As soon as a soldier frantically jumped out of a chemical firetruck’s driver’s seat, a laser beam pierced it.

The long bridge truck that crossed the 100 meter river was more melted than broken when a shot hit it.

“What are we supposed to do with all this going on, dammit!?”

“At least we’re not the Faith Organization soldiers on the other side of the river. Looks like they were trying to cross the river too, but the Princess’s Killer Squall made short work of them.”

The Killer Squall was a laser beam weapon shaped like a planetarium lens and it was the kind of anti-personnel weapon not seen on more recent Objects. It fired more than 100 lasers at once and they scattered like an actual squall to vaporize the waves of approaching people. The First Generation Objects had been built on the multi-role concept, so they were built for anti-Object, anti-encampment, anti-vehicle, anti-ship, anti-air, and anti-personnel

purposes.

The single-focused Second Generations were certainly terrifying, but it was the older First Generations that made the puny soldiers' throats dry up.

"Hey, what's going on? The Princess is falling back as she fires. Is she leaving us behind!?"

"Have you already forgotten our strategy, Heivia? Urd prefers long-range and Verdandi prefers short-range, but with the river blocking their way, they'll be forced to use Urd if the Princess falls back. We're limiting their choices before blowing them away."

And the Trinity Style's main purpose here was to prevent the Legitimacy Kingdom from withdrawing. If the Trinity Style did not take the bait and they simply glared at each other from a distance, the Princess would be outside of her attack range, but that was fine.

If they could buy some time, they could finish their withdrawal preparations.

And that made it more likely that Skuld would escape.

So the Trinity Seven would rush things.

It would approach as close to the river as it could.

That clearly worked against it in the short run, but that left a possibility of destroying the Princess. Urd would be forced to fight in that mindset.

Or so they thought.

They could not have been more wrong.

A moment later, something unbelievable happened.

The 200,000 ton mass leaped as if jumping over the river.

Quenser gasped on the ground and it took him some time to grasp what had happened.

First, the Trinity Seven's horizontal laser space elevator of a main cannon aimed downwards. And with a deafening roar, it had fired something toward the ground.

But it had not used that blast to make the jump.

Instead of a heatwave or shockwave, a strange sticky liquid spread out from the blast. It hardened in just a few seconds, creating a giant upwards slope made of plastic.

The Trinity Style raced up that at full speed.

It had used a ramp.

And that provided a powerful enough jump to cross the river.

"Wah, wah, wah, wah, wah, wah, wahhh!?"

"You've got to be fucking kidding me!!"

The two idiots shot to their feet and ran as far away from its expected landing point as they could get.

The Trinity Style would have landed at least 100 meters away, but with a crackling and air-splitting explosion, bluish-white sparks scattered in every direction. The two idiots fell to the ground more due to the fear than actually being hit by something. The massive amount of static electricity keeping the 200,000 ton mass afloat had reacted with the repellent scattered across the ground. It turned the air into ozone, scorched the ground, and nearly blew Quenser and Heivia away.

The Trinity Style did not care about them at all.

It accelerated straight toward the Baby Magnum.

And the Princess was caught off guard by the unexpected development.

"You can't fall back any further, Princess!!" warned Frolaytia. "The maintenance base zone is far closer to the front line than usual. Any further and the base will be in range!!"

“Kh…understood!!”

The Princess had been gradually falling back, but a definite change came over her actions. She moved forward to meet the Trinity Style.

Heivia gave a shout while trembling on the ground and uncomfortably sweaty.

“This wasn’t supposed to happen!! This puts the Princess at a geographic disadvantage! Now they can switch back and forth between Urd and Verdandi! This thing was enough of a black box already, but our odds of victory are slipping further and further away!!”

“But it’s not like we can just tell them to stop. Heivia, keep the observation equipment focused on the Trinity Style. We need to figure out whether that’s Urd or Verdandi, how the Object is structured, and where the armor is thinnest. We need to get all that data to the Princess in real time! Hurry!!”

“What? Hey, wait! Where do you think you’re going!?”

Quenser did not answer as he approached a chemical firetruck that had rolled onto its side nearby. One of the packed-together military vehicles had been hit by a small laser beam, but the rest were fine. He traced a finger along the side and recalled its structure before pulling out some Hand Axe plastic explosive from his backpack. He stuck a fuse in the clay-like explosive, pasted it to the rolled-over firetruck, and detonated it.

Meanwhile, the two giants continued their shootout a short distance away.

The Baby Magnum and Trinity Style were only a kilometer away from each other now. In an Object battle, that was like infighting with their foreheads pressed together. The Trinity Style was moving quickly in every direction to confuse the Princess. While making quick steps forward and back or left and right, it would occasionally fire a container shell full of sulfuric acid or liquid nitrogen. Even without a direct hit, they created toxic swamps that restricted the

Princess's movement and sometimes damaged her armor or sensors with their vaporized gases. It also used its ramps made of a special plastic. Those gave the Trinity Style a new axis of movement in addition to the existing 360 degrees of horizontal motion.

"What do we do? What the hell do we do!? It's all over if the Princess loses, but I can't think of any way to help! And Quenser, what the hell are you pulling out!?"

"Baking soda."

The student pulled a few tanks out of the chemical firetruck. They were about the size of industrial beer containers.

"It's a foaming agent used in chemical fire extinguishers. Mix it with sugar and place it over a fire and you can make honeycomb toffee."

"And what good is that? That thing is 200,000 tons of steel and not even a nuke can stop it. That isn't going to help!"

"Just watch. More importantly, Heivia, check your handheld device's map. Pay special attention to the ramps the Trinity Style is making."

"?"

It was a foolish action when up against an Object's sensors, but Quenser ducked low as he ran along the orange-burning wasteland. He was fortunate that the Second Generation was not built specifically for anti-personnel attacks and that its acoustic sensors were less accurate with all the explosions. He felt a squeezing in his chest when tingling shockwaves reached his skin and a strange chemical smell burned his nose, but he still tried to approach the region of intense fighting.

"Heivia, you're supposed to be a radar analyst, right? Try to predict where the Trinity Style will place its ramps based on where they are on the map. We'll get there ahead of it."

"Sure, but then what!? This isn't an opponent we can trip up!"

“Don’t be so sure.”

Quenser grinned and pasted some Hand Axe to the bottle of baking soda he had brought with him.

“Those ramps are probably made from cyanoacrylate. You might know it as instant glue. On its own, it’s used to stick things together, but mix in some baking soda and it will expand and harden into a plastic. It’s used with figurines and dioramas and I knew someone who was into that kind of thing back at my safe country school.”

“Baking soda? Wait, you mean…?”

“It’s probably releasing a calculated amount of cyanoacrylate and baking soda from those containers. It’s just like making a perfect circle with a firework. But what if we throw some of our own baking soda into the mix after it’s fired into the ground but before it fully hardens? Their calculated design will fall apart and they’ll have a twisted failure to deal with. If it tries to use it, it’ll trip up and this will all be over!!”

Heivia compared the empty spots on the map to the Princess’s distance and position and managed to predict where the Trinity Style was likely to place a ramp.

Quenser threw over the bottle of baking soda.

Then they waited while he held his finger over his radio’s detonation button.

And…

And…

And…

Part 6

Like a quick record scratch, a brief disturbance came over the Trinity Style's actions.

Part 7

Had the Trinity Style noticed Quenser and Heivia's plotting or not?

Either way, something happened a moment later.

"Wha-…?"

Quenser was dumbfounded.

The Objects were already infighting at around a kilometer apart, but the Trinity Style moved even further in. Without firing another wasted shot, it accurately dodged the Princess's seven main cannons and forced its way forward.

It moved close.

So very close.

They were only around a dozen meters apart. No, it was closer to being only a few meters.

"…!?"

The Baby Magnum tried to force herself away.

Meanwhile, the Trinity Style's main cannon transformed. It was just like baseball fans using multiple signs to form a single message and flipping them over to form a different message.

The main cannon moved from the side to the front. The magazine split in two and attached to the upper left and right of the spherical main body as balancers.

A blinding flash scorched the eyes of everyone watching.

"What!?"

"A laser beam!!"

It was not the laser's own light. It was the light created as the laser burned the dust and other impurities floating in the air. Instead of firing the laser at the bottom of the container shell to expand the air and fire it, the Object had simply fired the ultra-high power optical weapon. Quenser felt an unpleasant tingle in his spine when he saw that.

"Does that mean…they switched?"

No.

That tingle was the finger of death.

"They switched from long-range Urd to short-range Verdandi!?"

It did not even last an instant, but far too much happened.

The first laser beam scorched the edge of the Princess's armor as she just barely dodged it. But that was only the setup leading to ruin. After being forced into that sudden evasion, the Baby Magnum was swung around by its own inertia and had a split-second restriction to its actions. The Trinity Style used that moment to further adjust itself and circle to the Baby Magnum's side.

In that position, its main cannon could hit the Princess, but hers could not hit it.

A surefire attack did not always refer to exceptional firepower or a strange new method.

Sometimes it meant taking up the position that would ensure the next attack would hit.

It was the declaration of checkmate.

It set up the ideal situation.

And that surefire attack took the form of a second laser beam that thrust the Legitimacy Kingdom into absolute despair.

The world was filled with light.

The sound had surpassed the limits of their senses.

The intense heat burning through the Baby Magnum was scattered in every direction. The air expanded explosively and that invisible wall struck Quenser and the others. He could no longer see Heivia who had been right next to him. He only felt a strange sense of floating, but he did not know if he was flying up or falling down. He had lost his sense of direction and even his sense of gravity.

It seemed to last an instant, but it also seemed to last for half a minute.

Even his sense of time was lost and he may have even seen his life flashing before his eyes.

At any rate, he found himself lying pathetically on his back once his thoughts recovered.

“Zh…gwah…!!”

The entire area reeked of chemicals. His throat stung. A sharp pain continued to stab him deep in his eyeballs.

But none of that mattered to him.

As he shook his blank head and got up, he thought his breathing would stop.

He saw the Baby Magnum.

That 200,000 ton mass of steel was more than 50 meters tall.

That First Generation’s overwhelming firepower and armor had ended the nuclear age.

It was the symbol of war and the parameter both enemy and ally used to determine who would win.

But now it seemed to have blossomed like a giant flower.

The right half had been blown away, melted, and torn up.

Part 8

The Legitimacy Kingdom called it the Trinity Style.

The Faith Organization called it the Norn.

Inside that Second Generation's cockpit, the 16-year-old girl named Verdandi Silent-Third slowly exhaled.

She used the internal line to communicate with the other cockpit separated by a thick wall.

"Target destruction confirmed."

"Verdandi, it's still moving. Wouldn't it be safer to finish it off here?"

"With no room left for negotiation, the defeated soldiers will do everything they can to oppose us. Our goal is confirming whether Skuld is alive or dead. We can settle this after that."

"Yes, there are times when a cornered opponent strikes back… Understood. You were the MVP this time, so I'll leave it up to you."

Nuke-resistant Objects could only be opposed with the firepower of another Object.

A few of the enemy's main cannons were still functioning and that was all it would take. But it would be unable to move properly with its own armor torn up like a giant flower. Not to mention that Verdandi had approached to point-blank range while avoiding all of its main cannons when it had been at 100%, so no desperate last ditch effort would be able to hit.

They did not want to waste any more time.

When things went south during a battle, the standard response was to send the officers and computers full of classified information out the back entrance first. If Skuld was placed in that same category, this would all be for nothing. They had to secure her before she

could vanish. If that was not possible, they would kill her. That was Urd and Verdandi's shared understanding.

Verdandi let go of the control stick to trace her fingers across the thick cable connected to her navel.

She narrowed her eyes in thought.

Then she grabbed the colossal weapon's control stick once more.

"Okay, let's go finish this already."

Part 9

“Heivia…”

Quenser grabbed the shoulders of his awful friend who was lying on the ground surprisingly close by.

He violently shook the boy.

“Heivia! Get up!! This is no time to be avoiding reality!!”

“”No…I’ve had enough…”

Heivia was not just passed out. He held his head in his hands and he grimaced like the stress was twisting his stomach into an S-shape.

“The battle is over. We lost. So just leave me alone. What else can we do against that monster!?”

“We can’t just sit here.” Quenser pulled out his radio. “The White Flag signal hasn’t been sent out. I don’t know if something happened back at the base or if all those bugs destroyed the equipment, but the battle hasn’t ended yet. I’m worried about the Princess too, but we can’t open her hatch with the tools we have on hand. We need to hurry back to the maintenance base zone. If we don’t go rouse Frolaytia and get her to raise the White Flag, we’ll all be slaughtered!! The Trinity Style will stop by the base first and then take us out on the way back like a souvenir or something!!”

“Please no!! I’m a noble!! Winchell family blood isn’t supposed to be lost in a place like this!!”

“Fine, then stay here and get blown to pieces!! How about I stick a bomb on your back!?”

He forcibly motivated the boy.

He pulled Heivia to his feet like he was a child throwing a tantrum in a department store toy aisle.

They were less than ten kilometers away from the maintenance base zone. Quenser looked around in search of a firetruck that had escaped destruction, but then Heivia started moving.

The Faith Organization soldiers had started crossing the river now that they knew there would be no more resistance. Heivia set his sights on one of the large motorcycles they were using and he swung his rifle to knock the driver off with a lariat.

He then beat down the soldier on the back seat before he could recover.

Gasping for breath and wiping an unpleasant sweat from his brow, Heivia spoke with bloodshot eyes.

“Pant, pant! D-dammit, if we’re gonna do this, then we’ve gotta go all out. Let’s change into their uniforms to blend in, Quenser.”

“I knew you could do it if you tried. I just wish you’d recovered a little sooner.”

The size of the uniforms was a little off and one of the motorcycle’s side mirrors had broken when it fell over, but it was far better than driving across the wasteland in Legitimacy Kingdom uniforms. Heivia took the driver’s seat and Quenser sat in the back seat as the two idiots made their way back to the maintenance base zone among the Faith Organization soldiers.

The sky was changing from the blazing orange to the dark curtain of night.

It was twilight, the color of parting.

They were returning to the familiar base they had woken up in that morning, but it was already filled with the tingling stench of death.

First, the mountain-like Object yelled a message down through its speakers.

“Attention Legitimacy Kingdom!! We have no intention of slaughtering you! Immediately disarm yourselves, move where we can see you, and put your hands in the air!! Hiding will be seen as

intent to resist and we will attack!!”

Despite the announcement, the countless cannons covering the Object’s spherical main body were intermittently firing. Whenever it spotted someone moving or trying to hide behind cover, it mercilessly vaporized them.

On the ground, the Faith Organization soldiers were shining their flashlights around.

Those flashlights were attached to the end of their assault rifles. That would normally reveal their position, but boldly walking around with such obvious light sources was another symbol of their absolute victory.

They seemed to be searching inside the buildings, below the large vehicles, and in other possible hiding places to drive out all of the soldiers. Quenser and Heivia saw several of their comrades being kicked in the back or butt to toss them out into the open.

“This is awful…”

In his stolen Faith Organization uniform, Heivia sounded like he was having a nightmare as he slowed down the motorcycle so as not to stand out.

“I supposed it’s better than lining them up and shooting them or stripping only the female soldiers naked, but we can’t function as an army at all now. There’s no chance of turning this around…”

“Since they’re using the infantry for the search, the Trinity Style’s acoustic sensors really must not be working right. And it isn’t just the disturbance speakers. Did the Princess manage to destroy the actual sensors in that extreme situation?”

Whatever the case, Quenser and the others were faced with the exact opposite of the situation a few days before. Quenser could now imagine just how difficult it had to have been for Skuld to wait in that tiny cockpit for the hatch to be pried open.

“Captured Faith Organization soldiers, you also come out with your hands up! We do not wish to accidentally take your precious lives!!

Please assist us so we can avoid any misunderstandings!!”

With vulgar laughter and relaxed behavior, the Faith Organization soldiers kicked the kneeling Legitimacy Kingdom soldiers to the ground mostly just for fun. At this rate, they might start pretending to surf on their backs.

“Where’d our busty commander get off to? She hasn’t been captured, has she?”

“That’s one question, but why wasn’t the White Flag sent out? I know the control tower collapsed, so was there a problem with the communication equipment?”

The two idiots discussed the situation while blending in with the Faith Organization soldiers on the stolen motorcycle, but as Quenser looked around, his face tensed up.

“You’re kidding…”

“What, did you find our busty commander?”

“No, but it still isn’t good. Heivia! You keep looking for Frolaytia and dealing with the White Flag. I’ve got another job to take care of!!”

“What is it!?”

“I found Skuld. If I don’t do something, she’ll be captured and killed!!”

Part 10

She would be killed.

She would definitely be killed this time.

Skuld pressed her back against the collapsed control tower's wall and did her best to hold her breath. Faith Organization soldiers were swinging around the flashlights on their assault rifles and the Norn was loudly demanding everyone surrender. But Skuld did not have that right. When she was found, her fate was sealed. The war treaties did not matter.

She knew that, but she could not escape.

She knew the Norn's specs better than anyone. She knew exactly what would happen to her if she tried making a mad dash out into the wasteland.

She heard footsteps on the dry ground on the other side of her cover.

Fear and panic grasped her heart.

Whoever it was sounded like a complete amateur in how little they were worried about being heard. These were the arrogant footsteps of someone who could hunt down the enemy without worrying about any resistance whatsoever. Tears welled up in the corners of her eyes when she heard them. Her mind seemed to shake.

"Attention Legitimacy Kingdom soldiers! Answer honestly when you are asked a question!! What we want most of all is Skuld and only Skuld!! If you do not unnecessarily shelter her, no unnecessary blood will be spilled!! Comply immediately to all commands!!"

It was hopeless.

If she did not escape from here, she would be found, but if she moved even a step, she would be found. How was she supposed to turn this around?

The footsteps continued.

They circled around toward her!!

“Skuld!! I finally found you. Are you okay?”

Then she saw a Legitimacy Kingdom face instead of a familiar Faith Organization one.

She was so surprised that her legs gave out beneath her.

She sat limply down on the ground.

“U-uuh…”

Unable to stand back up, the twintail girl wrapped her arms around Quenser’s waist and buried her face in his body to suppress her sobs the best she could.

“Uuuuuuh!!”

Quenser said nothing for a while.

He placed his hand on her head, slowly rubbed it, and then crouched down to her eye level.

“Skuld, now is your only chance to escape.”

“How? How!? There are Faith Organization soldiers everywhere. And Urd and Verdandi are covering everything with the Norn. If they use their acoustic sensors, they’ll find me right away no matter how far away I am! They’ll catch up and kill me!!”

“Don’t worry.”

Quenser gently spoke to her to help her escape her panic.

“The Princess did it. She destroyed the Trinity Style’s acoustic sensors. So if you can slip past the soldiers’ eyes, you can escape. You can do it now.”

“But even then…how!? More than 100 soldiers are trying to find me!!”

“I’ll give you my uniform.”

Skuld’s tear-damp eyes widened at that.

Quenser patted at the side of his waist in the Faith Organization uniform he had stolen.

“I don’t know if it’s because Urd specializes in chemical warfare, but this thing has a mask. That means you can hide your face. Skuld, change your hairstyle, put on the mask, and change into the same uniform as them. Then you can hide in their midst. Follow them until you can find an opportunity to feign engine trouble with your motorcycle to stray from the trip back to base. No one will suspect it now, but you only have one chance at this. Got that?”

“B-but…” Skuld looked like she could not believe her eyes. “Then what about you?”

“I’m a civilian student. If I raise my hands with the other soldiers and show no sign of resisting, they won’t kill me. But you’re different, Skuld. You have to escape this. You understand, right? We only have one uniform and you’re the one that needs that safe zone.”

He did not let her say anything more as he quickly stripped down to his underwear. He did not have to wait for Skuld to change. He held out his hands to stop Skuld from saying whatever it was she wanted to say and then he staggered out into the open so the Faith Organization soldiers would find him.

“Why? Why would you go this far for me?”

“Don’t ask me. Does this look like a situation where I’ve had to time to put all my feelings in order?”

Part 11

“Freeze!!”

“Put your hands up!!”

Quenser felt his lifespan shrinking as several flashlights shined on him. He knew each of those lights was a gun barrel aimed his way.

But he played dumb in only his underwear.

“Wow, wow, wow!! I was napping off duty and I’m still half asleep, so can you explain this nice and simple so even an idiot could understand? What’s going on? Was my unit with the Faith Organization???”

He received a blow in lieu of an answer.

An assault rifle stock struck him in the bridge of the nose and he collapsed to the dry dirt.

Then some relative of a large radio was passed over his entire body.

A high-pitched beep sounded.

One Faith Organization soldier contacted someone by radio.

“I picked up the ‘scent’ of the Pilot Elite rescue locator on him. Saint Skuld should be nearby.”

“Then search the area,” replied the radio.

“Wait a second. Dammit!”

A soldier who had circled behind the collapsed control tower clicked his tongue and returned.

He held a special suit in his hand.

“It’s only the Elite’s special suit! Some of the scent will remain on

Saint Skuld herself, but it won't be enough to track her if she changed clothes. We might not be able to track her down even if we release the dogs!!"

"Well, then. I wonder what Skuld might look like after her makeover. Legitimacy Kingdom? Faith Organization? Or perhaps a civilian medical volunteer? She would have had a number of options."

Everyone turned toward Quenser who was holding his nose.

As soon as he shook his head, a storm of kicks rained down on him.

Once he was covered in bruises and coughing up blood, the voice on the radio stopped them.

"Wait."

"But, Saint Urd!"

"You found Skuld's scent on a boy in only his underwear, right? He might be someone Skuld befriended after betraying us. If he assisted her escape, he might know where she is hiding, how she intends to escape Experimental Battlefield Madagascar, or what route she will use."

"Then…?"

"Bring him to our temple. We can have a professional interrogator handle the rest. At the very least, that should provide more information than beating him to death here."

"But Saint Skuld might be escaping as we speak…"

"I know that. This is second best. Capturing Skuld here and now would of course be best. Search the entire base zone and then widen the search area. Assume the next 24 hours will decide everything."

The transmission ended there.

The Faith Organization soldiers looked down at Quenser who was

covered in sand and blood and could not move properly.

After one more kick to the boy's side to vent his frustration over the extra work, one of the soldiers spoke.

"Stand up."

"…"

"We will guide you to our temple. Some enjoyable recreation awaits you."

Part 12

A girl heard that voice.

She was wearing the Faith Organization uniform that was her one and only hope of escape.

She joined the many other soldiers mocking and beating her savior.

Her face was covered by a gas mask and her hairstyle was changed.

She hid her expression from everyone.

And Skuld Silent-Third clenched her teeth and did her very best to suppress the tears and sobs.

Part 13

The hellish night passed and the morning sun rose into the sky.

The Legitimacy Kingdom finally sent out the White Flag signal, but the Norn had no reason to care. They had already done a complete search of the maintenance base zone and the White Flag would not stop them from searching the surrounding area.

The Faith Organization were the absolute winners, so they were relaxed. Even though they were continuing to search for a full 24 hours, not all of the soldiers were active the entire time. They were divided into three shifts, so they did not have to work more than eight hours and a lot of them found chances to take a break during that time as well.

They all knew the truth.

There was nothing a single individual could do if they were thrown out into that vast wasteland. Escaping the island was only a dream. With no support, a human without claws and fur would dry up in only a few days. And even if she did not, she would be caught by the Faith Organization search program. Either way, this was the end for Skuld.

"…"

More time passed.

Evening fell.

The girl in a Faith Organization uniform stared at the distant line of military trucks as they left.

She threw aside her chemical warfare mask and fell to her knees in exhaustion.

She had escaped their search.

But in exchange, the boy who had abandoned his own safe zone had

been captured by them and was being taken back for interrogation.

“Heh heh…”

It was all too much, so a weak laugh escaped her lips.

She had no idea why she was laughing, so she punched her own face as hard as she could.

And then…

“So you were safe…”

Major Frolaytia Capistrano arrived with a few bodyguards. Skuld slowly looked back while still kneeling on the ground and she asked a question while ignoring affiliation and rank.

“What are we going to do now?”

“We have two main options. The first is to use the transportation unit to withdraw by sea. The second is to pretend to do that but actually bring in plenty of supplies, repair the Baby Magnum as quickly as possible, and send it back out there. The top brass chose the withdrawal 8 to 2. We’ve already destroyed the ‘flower garden’ infected by foreign pollen which was the entire reason we came here, so they see no reason to lose any more lives.”

“…”

“Although their real reason is because they want to bring back as many prizes as they can. Skuld, you are a Faith Organization Pilot Elite, so your body is filled with classified information. It would be very valuable indeed if we could bring you back along with the Dvergr work robots that form the Trinity Style.”

The Legitimacy Kingdom was going to withdraw.

They had never even considered a rescue of the POW taken back to the Faith Organization base zone.

For one thing, there would be no POW mentioned in the official announcement. After all, Quenser was a student and not a soldier.

In war, unofficial cooperators were not counted among the dead. In other words, no one would be blamed if they gave up on rescuing him.

But Frolaytia had more to say.

"…I think this is an excellent opportunity."

"?"

"The Baby Magnum was badly damaged. It will take a week for the transportation fleet to arrive and repairs to be made. Even if we withdraw, it will take time. That means The Faith Organization will have nothing to fear and will grow lax. …We might just be able to sneak some people into their maintenance base."

Skuld did not understand what she was being told.

She first looked to Frolaytia and then to the bodyguards.

Not one of them was smiling.

"Hey, Skuld. I don't know how the Faith Organization does things, but in the Legitimacy Kingdom military, there's one thing they make sure to beat into our heads during training. Yes, I'd always thought it was a nice thing to say but ultimately meaningless, but I have it to thank for my decision to head back at the very last moment during that Alaskan hell. Do you know what it is?"

Frolaytia looked Skuld right in the eye.

And she took a breath.

"No matter what, the Legitimacy Kingdom never abandons a comrade in arms!!"

Her voice felt like a slap to the face.

Or perhaps it hit Skuld in what could be called her soul.

Meanwhile, Frolaytia continued speaking.

“Whether we withdraw or continue on, we *will* rescue Quenser. And we will use whatever we can to do so. I’ve already heard Heivia’s report. Since you were hiding from them with a Faith Organization uniform, I assume that boy was the one who gave you that safe zone.”

“…”

“Even if you were from enemy nations, this means a professional soldier survived in exchange for a civilian’s life. To be blunt, you are worth less than a dung beetle now. You are the ball of dung it rolls around. But we are kind and we will give you the chance to regain the value of a dung beetle. …Help us, Skuld. You must know the layout of their base zone better than anyone.”

Frolaytia did not ask for a handshake.

She did not even wait for agreement.

She simply clicked her tongue in annoyance and turned her back with her bodyguards. They all left.

Just one soldier remained to the end.

It was Heivia Winchell who had changed back into Legitimacy Kingdom equipment.

“Don’t blame yourself so much, little lady.”

The frivolous boy spoke while pointing his thumb at his own chest.

“There’s nothing to worry about. You’ve got the cavalry with you this time.”

Chapter 5

Part 1

It was evening as the Faith Organization military truck carrying Quenser drove across Experimental Battlefield Madagascar's wasteland. They crossed a large river on a giant hovercraft and continued driving. At first, Quenser tried to remember how far they had gone, but his sense of distance faded as time passed.

Giant baobab trees stood up from the flat wasteland.

As they continued on, he started seeing abandoned giant seesaw-like machines measuring over 10 meters tall. He guessed they were left over from oil mining.

The Faith Organization maintenance base zone was on the wasteland, not in the jungle.

It looked like ancient ruins buried in sand.

The buildings of white stone did not look at all like a military facility. And surprisingly, they were a lot like the ones from Quenser's homeland. They had grand stained glass windows and giant crosses on the roof. Some of them had a tall bell tower.

This was likely a remnant of the old Age of Exploration.

They were cathedrals and monasteries. And that small village of buildings had several giant circus-like tents set up between them. Those structures of thick blast-resistant sheets were the maintenance base zone made from Faith Organization technology.

At first, Quenser thought that religious organization had simply wanted a location that provided moral support.

But he was wrong.

Norn, Dvergr, Berserkers, and Draupnir were all aspects of Norse Mythology. This was not an organization that decorated things in giant crosses. And the Faith Organization would be more sensitive to such differences than anyone else.

Which meant…

(The shape of the crosses is a little different. Oh, weren't there some that used existing tree and sun symbols to help spread the Bible? I think in Norse regions, they even interpreted Thor's hammer as a cross.)

That may have been the Faith Organization style, but there was no guarantee that the area would be safe from damage in a battle. From an outsider's perspective, it was hard to tell whether they were treating it carefully or carelessly.

The military truck finally stopped in a parking space.

Someone spoke with a rifle in hand.

"Get out."

"…"

Quenser obediently placed his hands behind his head and did as he was told. He was so badly outnumbered that they had not even bothered handcuffing or otherwise restraining him. Or – since they were only taking him prisoner at the request of a Pilot Elite – perhaps they were actually giving him a chance to resist so they would have an excuse to shoot him.

The area was inundated with voices speaking a Faith Organization language.

Quenser's heart was assaulted by the hopelessness of being left behind in a strange land.

After hearing that the POW had arrived, the Pilot Elite approached with several bodyguards around her. The 18-year-old girl wore a green special suit that freely showed off her sexy bodylines. Quenser did not know if this was Urd or Verdandi.

"The first 24 hours will soon be up, but we have yet to find Skuld. He will be our crucial insurance. Handle him with care and make sure you do not go too far and kill him."

The Elite smiled thinly and seemed to be warning the soldiers.

But an unpleasant sweat covered Quenser's face when he heard it.

By saying "make sure you do not go too far", she was saying that level of cruelty was standard. Plus, she had made sure to speak in a language Quenser understood. She was letting him understand her in order to shake him.

War treaties and the rules on POW treatment were meaningless if no one ensured they were upheld.

A new battle was already beginning. And it was a horribly unfair battle that would unilaterally wear down his soul.

The sexy Elite moved her face in close and spoke with the confidence of a predator.

"We wish to know where Skuld is no matter what. We wish to know where she is likely to hide. We will likely get to know each other much better before long, but keep that in mind. We are not sadists; we have a goal. As long as we achieve that, we have no reason to harm you."

"…"

"We can discuss the details in the interrogation room, but do you have any questions?"

That was likely meant as a light jab.

By initially working up his fear and then hinting at a chance for negotiation, she left him unsure whether to go in for an attack or to fortify his defenses. It left him unsure which direction to raise his shield in.

That was why Quenser played dumb.

"I've got one: When will I get a change of clothes?"

He was raising his hands in just his underwear.

As soon as the sexy Elite looked down at his body, he gave an honest thrust of his hips.

The Pilot Elite's face grew red and she screamed. To punish him for slighting their saint, the surrounding soldiers subjected him to concentrated fire from their military boots.

Part 2

After receiving a thorough beating, Quenser was taken to a stone building that had once been used as a monastery and he was thrown into a room.

There was no real furniture and all four walls were made of cold stone. It had likely been lit by a lamp or candle originally, but a fluorescent light and power cable had been crudely added in much more recently. The lighting was reminiscent of a construction site or a tunnel. In what may have been part of the original design, the window had a heavy metal shutter over it and the thick door could not be opened from within. He did not want to imagine what kind of life the person in here had lived.

There was not even a blanket. He hoped not, but the small bucket in the corner may have been his toilet.

As he gloomily looked around the room, he finally started feeling along the walls and floor. He doubted he could easily escape a maintenance base zone with around a thousand soldiers, but he at least wanted a weapon. The building was solidly built without any crack between stones, but he still hoped he could pull one of those stones out.

Then something unexpected happened.

As he grabbed at one of the wall's stones and managed to move it, the center of the floor split open. There seemed to be a trapdoor there. Through the one meter opening, he found a rusty ladder.

"Wait, wait, wait, wait! Why!? Why is this happening the instant I get here!?"

He shouted to himself, but when he thought about it rationally, he recalled this was an old monastery and not part of the Faith Organization maintenance base.

In which case…

(Do they not know all the details of the old building they're borrowing?)

But his quizzical look was interrupted by footsteps from beyond the thick door. He could not let them discover the secret trapdoor. It was an incredible discovery, but he could not just vanish through it when he did not know where it led.

He was not going to waste this valuable opportunity.

He moved the stone on the wall again and managed to close the trapdoor.

(I'm not going to eventually trigger a giant metal ball rolling down a slope at me, am I?)

The footsteps stopped in front of the door.

He heard a key being inserted and then the heavy door opened.

He recognized the Faith Organization soldier.

"Eric, you made it back here?"

"That doesn't matter. Just put on some clothes. Saint Urd is entirely useless because she won't stop blushing and covering her holy face with her hands. Honestly, she's too busy shrieking and wiggling around to focus on her mission."

Eric Kingsvalley had brought him a brightly colored prisoner's uniform. As he put it on, Quenser realized their positions had been entirely reversed.

(So that was Urd. I guess that means I still have to meet Verdandi.)

"Is my interrogation about to start?"

"Yeah. Although the higher ups really aren't sure what to do now that they know you're a student and not a soldier. Still, I'm not sure the war treaties are going to protect you. You should be prepared to see what look like dental or sculpting tools. I can't stop them."

“Are you serious…? You really can’t save me?”

“Sorry.”

Once Quenser finished dressing, he was taken out of the room. They did not restrict his information with a blindfold or anything else. Two soldiers with rifles escorted him down the stone hallway.

Eric looked like he wanted to say something the entire time, so Quenser finally asked about it.

“What’s the matter? You aren’t glad to be home?”

Quenser could hear the raucous voices of people celebrating their victory. Norse Mythology apparently had no taboos about food, so they were likely going to town with fish and booze. Eric’s gloomy atmosphere had to stand out in the unit.

“I don’t know what’s right,” replied Eric.

“…”

“You let Saint Skuld escape. I heard that was why you were captured. What was I supposed to do? What would really have been best for Saint Skuld?”

Quenser did not have an answer for him.

The monastery’s front entrance was made of thick bronze. It was only locked by a bar across the inside, but that had been replaced with an alloy bar and a hydraulic cylinder arm. It was simple, but that meant it was difficult to open from the outside and had no lock to be picked.

They left the old monastery building and he was taken to a circus tent.

Surprisingly, it was Urd Silent-Third he found in the small interrogation room.

The soldiers got to work as she used a hand to toy with her long golden braid.

“Handcuff the interrogation subject and attach the chain to the table.”

“Oh, dear,” said Urd. “Is there any need to go that far?”

“We can never know what he will do out of desperation. Also, we will be taking this.”

The soldiers took something from the table.

It was a bowl full of colorful fruits.

“Ahn! Those are my snacks!”

“You are about to speak with an enemy POW. Please refrain from using a knife and fork.”

“Even a plastic fork?”

“Even a plastic fork.”

“Boo. That means I can only eat the banana. Surely you aren’t going to take that away from me because I might step on the peel and hit my head on the corner of the table.”

“Saint Urd, please keep in mind that your presence can influence the fate of our entire unit…no, of the Faith Organization as a whole.”

“Even when I’m a replaceable spare Elite?”

The saint smiled a little as she toyed with the banana in her hand.

The soldiers pretended not to hear her sarcastic comment as they handcuffed Quenser to the table, had him sit down, and backed away. They waited by the wall instead of leaving the room altogether.

Urd took the opposite seat.

She looked at Quenser’s face, swallowed the line she had been planning to start with, and…

“…Kyah☆”

She remembered something, blushed, and covered her face with her hands.

She seemed to be the oldest of the sisters, but she might have had a dirty imagination.

Also, something she had said had caught Quenser’s attention.

“A replaceable spare Elite…? What does that mean? I mean, aren’t you so desperate to hunt down Skuld because-…!!”

He was cut off.

Someone had walked in from the door behind him, grabbed his hair, and slammed his face against the table.

There was a loud bang and the boy was left dazed, but the person then brought their lips to his ear and whispered to him.

“We are the ones asking the questions here. Don’t get full of yourself just because you have information on Skuld, you student. All we have to do is wring that information out of you.”

“Who…are…?”

Just as he groaned that question, they grabbed his hair again and shoved his face into the table. With another loud sound, he sensed a rusty flavor flow into his mouth from his nose.

“Verdandi, I know how you feel, but we won’t get anywhere like that.” Urd sounded exasperated. “Now forgive him already.”

“And you! Don’t just use my name like that! Why are you giving the POW our information!?”

“Oh, dear. But aren’t you the one that confirmed that’s your name by responding to me?”

“～ ～ ～!!”

The twintail girl named Verdandi let go of Quenser's hair in frustration, walked around the table, and stood next to Urd. She crossed her arms and sat directly on a corner of the table.

Urd smiled and asked a question.

"Now for your questioning. Do you know anything about Skuld's whereabouts?"

"Good cop, bad cop, huh? Going old-fashioned, I see."

"If you would prefer, we can always use a cutting-edge truth serum."

"Verdandi."

Urd lightly shook her peeled banana to lightly scold her sister and then peered at Quenser's face. But she seemed to give up before he could react. She blushed and looked away.

"What's the big deal with seeing some guy half-naked?" asked Verdandi with an exasperated sigh.

"Y-you can only say that because you didn't see it yourself! He…he went…! Ahh, the image is burned into my eyes! What am I supposed to do!? K-kyah☆"

"This just means you have a dirtier mind than you thought. You hidden pervert."

After spitting out that comment, Verdandi turned the conversation back toward Quenser.

"You seem to be mistaken about something. We are not trying to capture Skuld because we want to hold a public execution or anything like that."

"…"

"You don't believe me, do you? What lies has Skuld been telling you?"

“You have no reason.”

“Do you think the Faith Organization is an irrational murder cult just because we’re an enemy nation?”

“As Urd said, you’re spare Elites. I don’t know what kind of tech you use. I hate to admit it since I’m a future engineer, but I really don’t. But if the Trinity Style is an Object with multiple Elites, then you have no reason to be so fixated on Skuld. Either of you can pilot it instead. You might even be able to recruit people to find yourself a second or third Skuld. But you set that possibility aside and you’re working hard to hunt down Skuld. Why? I can’t imagine there’s a logical reason. And I can’t imagine it’s some tear-jerking reason just cause you’re sisters. You’re letting your emotions drive you as you punish her for your own dark pleasure, aren’t you!?”

“Well, would you look at that?”

“Yes, more of our information has gotten out than I thought.”

So would they silence him?

That was Quenser’s first thought, but their response was a surprising one.

“Munch, munch. Well, it isn’t entirely wrong to say we’re driven by emotion.”

“Just so you know, we’re trying to catch Skuld because we want to help out your Legitimacy Kingdom.”

“…What?”

Quenser could not help but voice his confusion.

They were enemies and he was being interrogated. Some high-level information warfare was underway, so he could not trust everything he was told. Nevertheless, he was taken aback.

“What do you mean it’s to help us out?”

“Skuld will defect to your Legitimacy Kingdom if we don’t do

anything, won't she? If that happens, she'll first provide research assistance in a military facility. And once she earns their trust, she'll be given a free pass to a safe country."

"Yeah, I don't even want to imagine that future."

Quenser could not understand what the two Elites were saying.

"Wait a second. What are you talking about? All of that is perfectly normal."

"Oh? Even if it throws a Legitimacy Kingdom safe country into enough chaos to makes Jack the Ripper look small time?"

A strange feeling was growing in his fingertips.

Unpleasant sweat poured down his forehead, but he could not wipe it away while handcuffed to the table.

"Jack the Ripper…?"

"What does Skuld look like to you? A poor little birdie? A girl whose life is about to be snuffed out?" Verdandi spoke with a mocking tone. "You're wrong if so. She's an Elite. She pilots an Object all on her own and blows away, fries, or vaporizes 1000 or even 10,000 people if need be. She can do all that without batting an eye. She casually bears all the responsibility of the war. That's the kind of monster all three of us are."

"But Skuld is somewhat out of tune. She's difficult to manage," added Urd with a smile. But a worrying shadow hung over the smile. "She is highly aggressive and not even we can always control her. She will sometimes blow away the enemy soldiers even after they have raised the White Flag. In fact, she does not always stick to the enemies. She will mercilessly pull the trigger on her allies, on journalists, on smugglers, and on medical groups. And all while laughing."

"She is a deviant. She could never preserve her reputation if the military were not protecting her. In this world, only soldiers, police officers, and executioners are allowed to kill. She just so happened to choose the military."

“You’re lying…”

Quenser shook his head, but it changed nothing.

“And on top of the direct damage Skuld will cause, she kills in a very contagious way. Let her out and who can say how many copycats you’ll have on your hands. It will become an epidemic, a major boom. That is another reason why the military needs to manage and conceal the information.”

“You’re lying!!”

Urd and Verdandi did not even flinch. He turned his head with his hands bound, but the soldiers by the wall had not reacted either. Only Eric looked back at Quenser as if he did not understand what was going on.

“This is not public knowledge. The Faith Organization has a reputation to uphold after all,” readily admitted Urd. “But every time we station our troops, a new soldier or two will go missing in that battlefield country. The official story is that they grew sick of war and deserted, but is it really just Skuld doing a good job of cleaning up after herself? That isn’t entirely known.”

“I hate to admit it, but we do have deserters. And once they lose the protection of the military, it isn’t too surprising for their corpse to turn up later on. And when a corpse is found on the front line, no one is going to investigate it too carefully. The corpse and the scene of a possible crime cannot be preserved. Or rather, it can be set up that way. When Skuld is given control of the Object, she will sometimes fire a shot entirely unrelated to the battle. It wouldn’t surprise me to find out there had been a corpse there she needed to hide.”

“Then why do you let someone so dangerous go free? No, why did you make her a Pilot Elite!? That makes no sense! You would normally keep her away!”

“That’s just how skilled she is. She truly is a natural killer. I’ve never known anyone who comes so very alive when it comes to killing. Urd said it’s because she’s ‘out of tune’, but I don’t believe

it. She was holding this bomb from the moment she was born."

Quenser strained his neck to look back.

Eric was sweating profusely too, but he had to accept it.

"Saint Skuld had a bad habit. Despite the great difference in rank, she would eat with everyone and spend her free time with us. But some soldiers would mistake her intentions and try to get more intimate with her. …When they went missing, the rumor was that the Valkyries in charge of religious morals had purged the guys who tried to lay a hand on her."

"We aren't that cruel a place. We are free to love whoever we like."

"Really, though. If they banned us from love, it would actually build up our frustrations and we might stop listening to our orders. …Although that explains why everyone has kept their distance from us."

"In your case, it's just a lack of feminine charm. You put too much focus on pure love and things like that."

That was the worst possibility.

Just thinking about it made Quenser's head spin and his mind melt like butter.

He managed to force out a question.

"Then what is Skuld trying to do…?"

"That's what we want to know," readily admitted Urd. "In order to get an easy win, we went along with her idea and gave her control of the Norn so she could feign defeat. …But after taking a single hit from your Object, she purposefully let you find and capture her. You can't count on a lunatic's ideas to make sense, but it looks like she was fed up with our 'birdcage' and wanted to fly free."

"The Legitimacy Kingdom thought you had had found the Norn's hatch on your own, didn't you?" interrupted Verdandi with crossed arms and a derisive laugh. "But the Norn's hatches are not normally

exposed. The surrounding Dvergr should have completely covered it up. She intentionally showed off the hatch to expose herself to the enemy. She abandoned that nuke-resistant weapon to enjoy herself on a field where a single bullet can kill her. That isn't normal."

"Skuld has been taught killing techniques by the military. There was plenty of suspicious behavior, but since she was never court martialed, the higher ups must have turned a blind eye. But not even that was enough to satisfy her. She wanted to see enough blood to bathe in. So she decided to leave the Faith Organization to use the ignorant Legitimacy Kingdom. …That way she can eventually blend into a defenseless safe country and kill to her heart's content."

"…That's ridiculous."

Quenser had almost stopped thinking altogether.

Then he started shouting like a spoiled child.

"That can't be true! Skuld really was trembling as she asked for help!! She felt cornered because of you! She's a murderer? A war criminal? How can I believe any of that when I only have your word to go on in this interrogation room!? You might have gotten your story straight in advance so you could trick me!!"

"True. We could have." Urd did not deny it. "This brings shame on us, but we aren't actually obligated to do anything. It would pain me for a safe country to fill with blood, but they wouldn't be Faith Organization people. If you absolutely refuse to cooperate, the bomb named Skuld will simply be passed to you. And that bomb is guaranteed to detonate eventually, killing a hundred thousand if not a million people when it does."

"And we aren't joking about that. Skuld's thirst for blood is so great that war wasn't enough to quench it. She must be planning something even greater in a safe country. Normal firepower will never be enough to stop her. In fact, you won't even be able to find her once she thoroughly blends in. The housewives who have never known anything but peace will lose their lives in the blink of an eye. And if she triggers a surge of copycats, it could cause a country

or two to fall."

"Yes, her killings have a way of bringing in a great number of 'fans'."

The Trinity Style had been a giant birdcage for Skuld.

These two sisters had done everything they could to create a place for their thoroughly broken younger sister.

But Skuld had betrayed them.

She had smashed that birdcage, flown out, and feigned innocence to pave the way to her new feeding ground.

Yes.

She would enjoy herself with a deluge of death in the safe countries that knew nothing of bombs or shells…in the very safe countries where Quenser's friends and family lived.

"That is why we are asking you this," said Urd. "Where will Skuld escape to? If she slips past the initial search and this becomes a long-term affair, where will she hide? Tell us that and we can nip this problem in the bud."

"…There's no way I can tell you that," answered Quenser despite all his sweat.

And not just because he could not entirely trust the Faith Organization.

"I don't know the answer!! All I did was give her the uniform as a last ditch effort to help her escape!!"

Part 3

The damaged Baby Magnum slowly returned to the Legitimacy Kingdom maintenance base zone.

However, they could not even replace its armor at the moment.

The Princess did not even leave the Object.

No one knew what feelings were spiraling through her chest.

It was a maintenance base in name only. It was closer to being a pile of rubble burying what equipment was still usable.

The soldiers were focused on a map of the Faith Organization base they had drawn up with Skuld's help. In the twilight, several flashlights illuminated the map as they came up with several routes of entry. It was not that they could not agree; they were coming up with several options for a number of different situations.

Frolaytia spoke up to motivate them.

"I want to attack while the Faith Organization is still celebrating. That means tonight. We can't hope for perfect preparation at the moment. I know that doesn't make you happy, but the transport fleet needed to withdraw won't arrive for a while yet. We're cornered anyway, so we have to do what we can."

Heivia and the others had searched through the rubble that had been the base zone to find a few vehicles that would at least still run.

After memorizing the plan, the soldiers headed toward those trucks.

Skuld was supposed to join them as a guide, but she was all alone a short distance away. She sat directly on the ground. She seemed to have trouble joining in when there were no other Faith Organization soldiers with her. Plus, she had to feel indebted to them after Quenser got captured to save her life.

As Frolaytia considered all that, a surviving member of the intelligence division spoke to her.

In fact, they more or less whispered.

“Excuse me, major. I would like to keep this private because it has yet to be confirmed.”

“Let’s hear it.”

Frolaytia expected this to be trouble. This was information that the intelligence division had decided might throw the unit into chaos if it got out. It had to be important and dark, so she had to prepare herself for that.

“We received quit a few casualties from that swarm of bugs. But…”

“Yes?”

“It’s strange. A few of them died from a snapped neck. Bug bites wouldn’t do that.”

“What…does that mean?”

“I’m not sure. I initially thought they had fallen from the stairs in their haste to escape all the bugs, but it seems that wasn’t what happened. And if the swarm hadn’t ended like it did, even the bones would have been eaten away and no trace would have remained.”

“…Are you saying another human might have been using the confusion to kill people?”

“But that brings us to some fundamental questions: Who? And why?”

Frolaytia fell silent.

The intelligence division worked to understand the discord and friction within the unit, but it was hard to say they had a perfect grasp of every last bit of it. It was possible someone might have developed a desire to kill unrelated to war. A military unit was also

a place where people lived together. There was no guarantee that no crimes would occur.

A short distance away, Skuld slowly stood up in her Faith Organization uniform. She used her small hands to brush the dust off of her butt.

“And one other thing,” continued the intelligence division member. “It’s about the delayed transmission of your White Flag.”

“Yeah, I regret that more than anything. Even if the control tower had collapsed, we had an emergency communications network using a different system. That said, it was only a makeshift system from what equipment we could scrounge up. The slightest burden was enough to knock it out. And that really delayed us…and got more people killed.”

“What would you say if I told you there were traces inside the equipment of dried sand being poured inside to intentionally create a short?”

“……

Everyone could see the look of displeasure on Frolaytia’s face.

The Faith Organization had been celebrating their victory, so they would not have bothered with that kind of sabotage. Plus, the timing did not work. Frolaytia had taken action immediately after the Baby Magnum’s defeat, which had been well before the Trinity Style arrived at the base. The White Flag had already been knocked out at that point.

In that case, it had to have been someone inside the Legitimacy Kingdom base.

But who would have benefited from that kind of suicidal action? More than 100 soldiers had been needlessly slaughtered due to that, but it had been entirely at random. If they went through the exact same thing again, an entirely different group of soldiers would be killed on a whim. In other words, that had forced the entire unit into a game of Russian Roulette with terrible odds.

(Wait.)

As Frolaytia considered it, she was taken in by a wicked thought.

It was a negative inspiration, much like unwarranted suspicion.

(Without the White Flag, everyone in the base would be killed. But is that really true? It was definitely dangerous for us in the Legitimacy Kingdom, but what about the Faith Organization POWs who were set to be rescued?)

To prepare for their mission, Heivia called over from a military truck.

Skuld responded by walking over.

She moved naturally.

Entirely naturally.

She walked right past Frolaytia Capistrano.

(During the bug swarm, we left the detention barracks just before they collapsed and we all made it safely to the storage building. Who was it that arrived last? Yes, who was at the tail end and was thus walking entirely unsupervised through the swarm?)

Something unpleasant pricked at a corner of her mind.

The busty silver-haired commander's eyes followed the twintail girl heading to the truck.

(And during the Trinity Style battle afterwards, we were still working to put the maintenance base back together. Since the detention barracks were unusable, we split the soldiers' barracks in two and used half for the POWs. That means the security was laxer than normal and we might not have known every little thing the Faith Organization was doing. It's entirely possible one of them sabotaged our makeshift communications equipment.)

"Hey!! We'll be moving along according to schedule, Frolaytia. You dig up a coffee maker from the rubble of the officer barracks.

C'mon, let's get going, Skuld. We only get one chance to make up for our loss!!"

Those words redirected Frolaytia's thoughts outward.

In the blood red of twilight, Skuld had already climbed aboard the truck.

With her onboard, the trucks began leaving the maintenance base zone one at a time.

Perhaps she should have stopped them.

Perhaps she should have asked Skuld about all this.

But…

(I have no proof…)

It was true that it was possible Skuld could have done it.

But Frolaytia could not imagine what the girl would gain by doing so. For one thing, the arrival of all the bell crickets and the Baby Magnum's defeat at the hands of the Trinity Style had been mere coincidence. Skuld could not have planned for them.

And if any little thing had been different, Skuld would have died. She was from the Faith Organization and not the Legitimacy Kingdom, so there was no guarantee they would always take her side. And even if she had been planning to betray them, she would have done so only after ensuring her own safety. Doing something here would have been no different than throwing away her own life. She could not have planned for these unexpected events and she had no reason to do this even if she had somehow planned for it. Looking at it that way, Frolaytia felt it was best to assume she was reading too much into this.

And even if they had a map, it would be difficult to sneak into the Faith Organization maintenance base without Skuld who could walk around the place with her eyes closed. Delaying things here might give the Faith Organization a chance to sober up from their victory and then they would lose their one and only chance to

rescue Quenser.

So Frolaytia weighed her options on the scales.

She knew something was bothering her, but she drove it to a corner of her mind.

Success and failure were the only two options here.

And yet if one little thing went wrong, the entire unit would be in danger.

Part 4

The military trucks drove in a line.

A few dozen soldiers were crammed into the back of each one.

Among them, Skuld was curled up with her hands around her knees because she was having trouble blending in.

Next to her, Heivia smiled while armed with an assault rifle and grenades that he had likely dug up when searching for any usable equipment.

“Don’t worry. If they were gonna kill him, they would’ve done it there. I don’t think they’ve got the brand-name needed to pull off a public execution of a commoner like Quenser. That means there’s something the Faith Organization wants to ask him. It won’t be fun for him, but his life is ensured until he talks. As long as we show up

before then, it'll all work out."

"…"

Skuld kept her head lowered as she glanced over at Heivia's face.

She did not actually respond, but he seemed satisfied that she was at least listening.

Skuld pressed her face against her knees again and muttered something under her breath.

"Quenser…"

And she hid her expression with her knees to make sure no one noticed.

The corners of Skuld Silent-Third's lips twisted up into a secret smile.

It was night.

The red sky looked like a sea of blood, but the sticky darkness was creeping in.

Unbeknownst to the soldiers, they were carrying a giant bomb as their rescue operation began.

Chapter 6

Part 1

“…”

Wearing a prisoner’s uniform, Quenser frowned toward a hamburger in the room of a monastery.

This feast should have been a wondrous treasure for a boy who was only issued soap-like rations, but he had a reason to be less than thrilled.

When Eric had brought the food, he had frowned too.

“Don’t think about it too much. It tastes fine and it’s nutritious.”

“Yeah, but isn’t this made from those Draupnir bell crickets that attacked our maintenance base?”

“I said not to think about it! I was eating these things every day like it was normal just last week. The food was the one highlight of working here. There’s nothing wrong with the ingredients, so just eat it!”

“Um, Eric, did you see the bug cage when you got back?”

For some reason, Eric paled and looked away from Quenser.

That was when Quenser noticed Eric looked like he had not been eating much lately.

“Wait, what did you see? Be honest with me! Just tell me!!”

“You’re really better off not knowing. …There were worms and caterpillars too…”

“It’s not just one kind!? They’re mixing them all together!?”

If whole bell crickets had been skewered or fried, he might have been able to build his resolve. But he had no way to brace himself mentally when he had no clue what was being transformed into

burgers and fries or how it was done. It was a lot like the difference between the fear of being ordered to jump from a cliff with the bottom visible five meters down versus when it was too dark to see the bottom.

“Also, well, this should be safe.”

Eric pulled out a small bottle.

A clear liquid sloshed around inside.

“It’s whisky. This brand is well-known among our men. It’s nearly 120 proof, so I wouldn’t drink it all at once if I were you. This is the kind of drink where you spend two hours nursing a single glass.”

“…That isn’t some kind of bug extract, is it?”

“Alcohol is made by breaking down the sugar in plants and then brewing or distilling it, so it should actually be more expensive to use some other ingredient. I doubt there’s anything to worry about.”

That said, they would not normally be issued something like this. It would be distributed as a special event after a battle. It was meant to celebrate victory over the Baby Magnum. Quenser was seriously conflicted over whether he could drink that.

“Your interrogation will continue tomorrow. I recommend forcing yourself to eat to keep your strength up. You said you don’t know where Saint Skuld is, but not knowing is the most dangerous thing during interrogation. Do you really not know or are you playing dumb? Who knows what a professional interrogator will do to figure that out.”

“Hey, Eric. Do you think what Urd and Verdandi said is true? I mean that stuff about Skuld being a serial killer who uses her battles to hide the bodies.”

“I don’t know.” Eric breathed a heavy sigh. “I’ve heard the Pilot Elites are treated pretty well, but does it really go that far? …I want to trust that the world has some sense, but I did find it odd how persistent Saints Urd and Verdandi were about this.”

Eric shut his mouth when he heard footsteps through the solid wood door. The Faith Organization must not have tolerated speaking about the Pilot Elites behind their back.

Eric faced the door and said one last thing.

“I don’t know when you will be released, but bear with it for now. Being a student should give you an advantage over a normal soldier. Don’t give up hope.”

The door opened and closed.

Quenser took a deep breath now that he was alone.

“Now, then.”

He set aside the burger and fries problem and glanced toward the bottle of whisky. But not to drink it. He tore off a sleeve of his prisoner’s uniform, twisted it into a rod shape, and stuck it into the bottle. Once the whisky had soaked into it, he used the electrodes of the fluorescent light to light it. He now had a makeshift alcohol lamp.

He knew something that was worth trying out before he had his fingernails torn off, had a truth serum injected into him, or had electrodes attached to his balls.

By moving a stone in the wall, a trapdoor opened.

It would be a dangerous journey, but it was better than discovering his own masochistic tendencies in a small locked room.

Part 2

It was the middle of the night.

The military trucks carrying Heivia, Skuld, and the others had stopped 10 kilometers away from the Faith Organization maintenance base zone. Any closer and the rumbling of the engines would have given them away.

They were surrounded by a wasteland with nothing but baobab trees to be seen.

The soldiers held their breath and aimed trumpet-like speakers toward the maintenance base. While only letting their targets hear environmental noises like rustling grass, chirping insects, and gazelle or buffalo footsteps, Heivia took the lead, veered far off the most direct route, and approached their target.

An early warning directional microphone was set up on the ground.

That parabolic device stood on a tripod and would pick up a cough from a kilometer away. But at the same time, it could only pick up sound from a very limited angle. Once the soldiers were behind it, they had nothing more to fear.

While the environmental noises tricked the microphone, Heivia touched the plate-sized parabolic device from behind. He slowly tilted it back so the forward-facing microphone aimed into the sky. Now it could not pick anything up and would forever have nothing to report.

Heivia spoke into his radio a short distance away.

“I’ve safely neutralized the Muninn parabolic microphone. It’s all just like Skuld told us. Come on in, everyone.”

“Understood, Heivia. We also have to worry about the Huginn up in the air, so be careful.”

As the Legitimacy Kingdom soldiers approached through the

darkness, they would occasionally aim rifle-like devices with a trumpet-like end into the night sky. Those were the directional speakers that had fooled the parabolic microphone with environmental noises.

They were targeting a toy-like drone that used six rotors to fly.

It used a highly sensitive microphone to detect any manmade noise, but they hid their breathing and footsteps by sending various environmental noises right at it.

Heivia wiped sweat from his brow when he saw the drone flying away like normal.

“Is intelligence everything in war? Having Skuld with us has made all the difference.”

“Don’t let your guard down,” said Skuld herself. “You never know what kind of pitfall awaits us at the whim of a god.”

“But why are they so obsessed with using sound?”

“We made a major mistake once in the past. Do you know what a strobe light tactic is?”

“Yeah. By flashing a strobe light several times brighter than a muzzle flash in quick succession, the cameras’ light adjustment has to keep switching back and forth and the image analysis can’t keep up. I think it’s even more effective if you switch back and forth between different wavelengths of light. Man, did you ever fall for an old-fashioned trick.”

“Even the smallest thing can be traumatic. That’s why our unit prefers to rely on sound more than light.”

“Then I guess we’ll be giving them some fresh trauma here. Will they start relying on smell next?”

As they slipped past some more microphones and drones, some giant seesaw-like silhouettes came into view. They appeared to be open-pit mining devices for oil extraction, but they had likely been abandoned for some time. They were all badly rusted.

Heivia climbed onto one of the 10 meter seesaws to view their destination.

The Faith Organization maintenance base zone was right in front of them.

A cathedral and monastery had been left behind on sandy ground. Tents thicker than circus tents had been set up in the gaps between the buildings. Halogen lights must have been set up because the base shined brightly in the darkness.

After photographing it with his handheld device and sharing the information with the others, Skuld spoke up over the radio.

“They would be holding a prisoner in the monastery, but the front door is made of thick bronze and we won’t be able to force it open. We either need to get our hands on an authorization key or blow it open with explosives.”

“We can do that. There’s more than 100 of us, and we’re not all going to sneak in. We have a rescue team, a power source team, and an escape route team, but the most important one is the sabotage team that will take care of the Trinity Style. Skuld, are you ready?”

“Of course.”

Heivia climbed down from the giant seesaw and handed Skuld a brick-sized mass.

He spoke to everyone for one final check.

“Listen, no firing your guns. I might sound like your mother insisting you do your homework, but let me say that again: no firing your guns. If we’re discovered here, we’ll be completely outnumbered. And if the Trinity Style joins in, we’re completely screwed. We really will be slaughtered.”

Even if the enemy had 100 soldiers out on patrol, there were still 900 in the base. And they would all be armed with military rifles. Could the Legitimacy Kingdom soldiers really sneak in to rescue Quenser without being noticed and without firing a shot?

This was an unprecedented mission for them.

“Got that? Then let’s work for the tax money they pay us.”

Part 3

The Faith Organization was a union of different religious groups, so its countries' laws tended to be based on religious rules.

And during the raucous party in the maintenance base, the soldiers thanked their gods that they had been born in a Norse Mythology country. Their religion could be really picky about duels and fights, but the hurdles for food, drink, smoking, and hobbies were extremely low. They could eat and drink anything.

"But you're still drinking way too much, Hoover! This stuff is 116 proof, so at least water it down a little!"

"Iii'm fine! We've got a goddesh of victory on our shide, sho it'sh not like thoshe loshers're gonna attack now…"

The first soldier clicked his tongue when he heard the other slurring his words. As soon as he supported unsteady Hoover with his shoulder, the man vomited quite spectacularly.

"Ubweh!!"

"Gross, you idiot! That's not some telephone pole; it's a historic relic!!"

"Huh? Shit…that'sh odd… I didn't think I'd had sho much to drink…"

"Well, you were wrong. Hey, medical team! Where's the tent with the cross on it!!?"

He practically had to drag Hoover away from their post and to the medical tent.

Just ten meters away, Heivia was hiding behind cover inside the Faith Organization maintenance base zone.

The delinquent soldier held an assault rifle.

But he had no interest in the lead bullets. What mattered now was the makeshift optional weapon attached near the muzzle.

“This is Heivia. The emotional weapon is working. I repeat, the emotional weapon is working. Focus on targeting the drunk ones. You can tell who’s drunk using thermo.”

A weapon that remotely manipulates people’s emotions and mental state might sound like it used mysterious alien space waves, but something much closer to home could pull it off.

For example, far infrared beams or microwaves.

When people were exposed to those, they would naturally start to feel hot. But if the situation was not explained to them in advance, they would not know what was happening because infrared beams and microwaves are invisible. From there, they would have to guess what was happening to them and people tended to accept whatever conclusion they reached.

Was their head growing so hot because they did not like what their comrades were saying?

Could they not sleep because of nerves?

Did their chest ache because they were feeling guilty after growing fond of their hostage?

An emotional weapon was developed to invite those misunderstandings that would destroy the enemy’s morale and coordination. It had been developed for long-term battles and siege operations, but the biggest flaw was how wildly its effects varied between individuals.

However, that could be overcome in certain limited circumstances.

For example, during a party when most of the targets were intoxicated from strong liquor.

“This is pretty amazing. When their body temperature skyrockets,

they get drunk faster. It's a lot like taking a hot bath when you're drunk. I'm not sure if this counts as high tech or low tech."

"Our food supply included boxes of whisky. It was nearly 120 proof. If they were serving that, this will knock out most of the soldiers."

"That's great. And it might not be a bad idea to 'borrow' a bottle while I'm at it."

They had not been issued this equipment. It was all handmade. They had pulled some scrap from the pile of rubble that had been their base, Skuld had given them information on the Faith Organization, and the technical people like the old lady had discussed how to take advantage of that information before putting these together.

War was all about intelligence. Heivia felt like war was the worst of the acts only possible for a cultured person.

"Anyway, it's working."

"Then let's continue with the plan."

The two of them nodded and then the group split apart into a Heivia team and a Skuld team. On the way, they used environmental noises from their directional speakers to neutralize the microphones they came across and used the emotional weapons attached to their rifles to speed up the soldiers' intoxication until they vomited.

Myonri, a female soldier on Heivia's team, gave a worried comment.

"W-will this really work? Won't it be useless against anyone who doesn't drink?"

"The idiots around them will take care of that. When one collapses, they need a second or third person to carry them away. Check their body temperature with thermo. If you see a sober-looking one, target the guy next to them. We'll stick with this until they find any proof that we're here."

Heivia's group made their way toward the monastery while accurately knocking out the Faith Organization soldiers without firing a single bullet or making any noise or light.

"Power source team here. Preparations complete."

"Sabotage team here. We're having trouble with our preparations. But it looks like we'll be able to get inside the maintenance bay when the blackout hits. We're waiting for the signal."

Heivia's team pressed against the wall of a giant tent as they listened to the voices over the radio.

They were already right in front of the monastery's front entrance.

The thick bronze door was locked with a simple bar on the inside, but that meant they could not pick the lock. Just as the guard out front took a swig from an amber-colored bottle, they hit him with the microwaves of their emotional weapons and then ran toward the door.

Heivia searched through the collapsed soldier's clothes and clicked his tongue.

"Rescue team here. There's no authorization key. I repeat, there's no authorization key. Activate Plan B. Let's do this the fun way!!"

A moment later, the maintenance base zone's power went out and the entire area was enveloped in darkness.

Part 4

The more than 100 Legitimacy Kingdom soldiers had split into a few different teams.

The power source team had a simple job.

Gas and electricity were not a guarantee in the middle of a wasteland, so large gas turbine generators and largescale transformers had been set up outside. That was their target. They had stuffed thin plastic bags with iron sand and used a makeshift slingshot made of rubber tubing and standing taller than they were. That threw the bags 200-300 meters to the exposed electrodes and cooling radiators.

Some were fried and some shorted out, but the effect was instantaneous.

The entire area lost power and fell into darkness.

While loading a new projectile in the giant slingshot, the soldiers shouted over the radio.

“Power supply team here. Blackout confirmed. I repeat, blackout confirmed! But we can’t predict if or when they’ll switch over to backup power!! Be careful with your next actions!!”

“This is Heivia from the rescue team. If you get that, then get going on the second wave!!”

“We already are!!”

The soldiers of the power supply team shouted back while firing more and more plastic bags toward the enemy maintenance base.

But these were not loaded with iron sand.

These were right on the borderline of violating some war treaties.

As the Faith Organization soldiers wandered around in the blackout, they switched on the flashlights attached to the end of their rifles, but then they fell into further confusion.

They could not see.

As if they were surrounded by a thick fog at night, the powerful lights were reflected right in front of them, spread out, and were blocked by a white screen. And they also detected a chemical smell.

“Ugh, cough, cough!! What…!? A smokescreen…? Are we under attack!?”

They could not see anything.

If they had been in enemy territory, they might have been tempted to fire around wildly, but this was their own maintenance base and they would only kill their own allies. They had no idea who was attacking, from where, how many there were, where they were headed, or how far they had spread. Pulling the trigger blindly would be a bad idea.

Meanwhile, they heard a loud explosion.

One soldier made a guess based on the direction it had come from and brought his radio to his mouth.

“Guard tower! Something’s happening at the monastery! I repeat…”

He trailed off when he started feeling dizzy.

His legs grew weak and he collapsed on the spot.

He had a bad feeling about this.

He kept wiping at his brow, but the sweat never stopped.

“Is this not just a smokescreen…? Oh, no. It’s a chemical weapon!! Everyone get your masks on! This is really bad!!”

After firing a grenade to destroy the bronze door, Heivia fired a few smoke grenades inside. White smoke filled the hallway and visibility grew poor.

It looked impressive, but this was not tear gas. No mask was necessary.

Heivia gave a quiet warning to Myonri and the rest of the rescue team.

“No bullets.”

But this was not newfound compassion or anything like that.

“Fire bullets at them and they’ll recover from their panic. Keep using the emotional weapons. They’re only collapsing because it speeds up their intoxication, but they’ll confuse it for poison gas with this smokescreen. The more scared they are, the easier this is for us.”

“Should we really be using these like this…?”

Myonri was concerned because smokescreens were classified as chemical weapons. They did not seem like it since they were generally used for communication or for defense, but if they were mishandled they could be dangerous enough to violate some war treaties despite being harmless.

At any rate, the darkness and smokescreen sealed off the Faith Organization soldiers’ sight in two ways at once. Heivia’s team exposed them to microwaves while entering the monastery.

Wouldn’t Heivia’s team have just as much trouble seeing through the smoke?

It would seem that way, but there were exceptions to everything.

Some of the smokescreens developed for war were meant to prevent a missile or shell from locking on. That sort of technology was always advancing. One smokescreen would successfully avoid a lock, so the next lock would work through that smokescreen. Then a new smokescreen would be developed to defeat that lock, and so

on and so forth.

In other words, this sort of smokescreen was made to allow a certain wavelength of IR through even though it blocked normal light.

Heivia's group had used a smokescreen with an intentional weakness, allowing it to block the enemy's vision while letting their own sensors and goggles through.

Thus, only the Faith Organization was confused.

"Cough!! Ugh, what is this gas? Not even the mask is working…!?"

"Do we absorb it directly through our skin!? That's just wrong! What happened to the war treaties!? Gebh!!"

"You idiot! Someone get Kicker's mask off of him! He'll drown in his own vomit!!"

It was absolute pandemonium. Frighteningly enough, the emotional weapon's microwaves passed right through the thick stone walls. Hiding behind cover like normal was not enough to escape the induced nausea.

After the majority passed out from intoxication, the few non-drinkers were held up by the assault rifles at close range. After knocking them out with the stock, Heivia's team used zip ties to bind their thumbs behind their back.

Heivia clicked his tongue.

"What is this? Is this both their barracks and where they hold the prisoners? Hey, Skuld! Do you know which floor skinny boy might be on!?"

"The detention barracks are on your left when you walk in," said Skuld via radio. "Prisoners should be held in the rooms starting from the bottom."

"And? This is a five story building with more than twenty doors on each floor. Do we have to break through 100 doors!?"

“We shouldn’t have any prisoners other than Quenser at the moment.”

“Then is he on the left in the back of the first floor!?”

While scattering more harmless smoke, Heivia’s team rushed down the hallway without silencing their footsteps. They arrived in front of the room in question.

“Hey, pizza delivery!! We’re getting this door open before the pie gets cold, so get back from the door!!”

There was no response.

Heivia wondered if the door was too thick for his voice to get through, but the monastery must have been old and there was a slight gap below the door. His voice had to have made it inside.

He exchanged a displeased look with Myonri.

“I hope it isn’t time for an unexpected adlib round after all this.”

“But opening this door comes first no matter what we do.”

She was exactly right.

He used the bottom of his military boot to kick open the wooden door.

Part 5

Bright light returned to the Faith Organization maintenance base zone.

It had taken about 7 minutes to switch to backup power.

“Saint Urd, this way!”

The sexy Pilot Elite ran across the base while surrounded by several bodyguards. The area was covered by a thick fog-like smokescreen and she could only see a few meters ahead. If she did not focus on the ground, she would have tripped over the soldiers groaning on the ground. She felt like she had been thrown into a bad dream.

“What happened to Verdandi!?”

“She was left with the medical team because she felt dizzy and nauseous! She may have been hit by the gas weapon!!”

Urd immediately concluded that was not possible.

If this smokescreen was a gas weapon, its effects would not be so varied. Urd and the others would have collapsed with everyone else, but she and her bodyguards were doing just fine. And when she looked at that group for any traits in common and considered the symptoms of those affected, she could guess what was happening.

Yes.

Everyone here was a non-drinker.

(Is this gas or something else being used to accelerate everyone’s intoxication from the whisky?)

If so, it was a baffling and highly uncertain method of attack.

She could think of a few different technologies that could induce intoxication, but they would only be a viable plan if the enemy

knew the Faith Organization soldiers were drinking plenty of alcohol. If the Legitimacy Kingdom had approached all excited about their new weapon only to find everyone sober, they would have been easily defeated.

How had they seen through this “habit”?

The obvious answer caused Urd to clench her teeth.

“Skuld…!!”

“Saint Urd, please hurry to the maintenance bay! We can turn this around with the Norn’s sensors!!”

The soldiers were treating the Object like Cinderella’s fairy godmother, but Urd had no right to scold them when she made use of the clean war fairy tale.

“How far along is the Norn’s maintenance?”

“That Second Generation is famous for not needing maintenance. As long as it’s supplied with the appropriate number of Dvergr, the programming will automatically repair it.”

That was another fairy tale. The Object was not actually that flexible, but Urd did not bother commenting. A lot of money and effort had gone into solidifying that image for wartime propaganda. A needless argument could destroy all that.

Fortunately, the smoke had not gotten inside the maintenance bay’s giant tent.

The maintenance soldiers who had defended it with their lives saluted Urd.

She used the elevator to reach the top of the Object and spoke to the bodyguards who had stayed with her this far.

“Since Verdandi couldn’t join us, I will enter the Norn alone.”

“Understood. We will instruct the medical team to inform you of Saint Verdandi’s condition.”

Urd passed through the spiraling tunnel to reach her personal cockpit. She quickly sat down, belted herself in place, stuck a thick cable into her navel, and closed the tunnel's barriers.

(Now, then. How much can I actually do?)

If she used the Norn's sensors, she could determine everyone's location even through the thick smokescreen, but that would not tell her who was Legitimacy Kingdom and who was Faith Organization.

She would check everyone's location for the time being. She could rule out everyone collapsed from intoxication and mark only those still standing. If she had them all report in via radio, she could count everyone who failed to respond as an enemy.

(Well, that's probably about it.)

She could not fire indiscriminately in the middle of her own maintenance base. The situation was working against her, but knowing where the enemy was would still help.

Her allies were collapsed from drunkenness, not from a strange gas.

If she informed them of that to prevent any further panic, the Faith Organization could bounce back. She did not know how many enemies had infiltrated the base, but she doubted it was a full battalion of 1000.

With that in mind, she piloted the Norn out of its giant tent and began searching for the enemy.

And then it happened.

The Norn's reactor suddenly stopped.

Hiding within the smokescreen right in front of the giant tent, Skuld held a radio to her mouth.

She had rushed out just in the nick of time before the power came

back on.

“This is the sabotage team. The Norn’s reactor has been shut down.”

Her team’s objective had been to approach the Norn, a Second Generation Object made from countless Dvergr work robots, and sabotage it.

Yes.

They had mixed in the Dvergr that the Legitimacy Kingdom had retrieved and made sure it was built into the Object.

It was only the size of a brick, but that had altered fate.

“The virus infection was a success. Looks like your electronic simulation division is as skilled as they claimed. It takes time to restart the reactor after it’s been stopped, so we can ignore the Norn for the time being.”

For all those robots to coordinate, they had to be exchanging some kind of data.

A virus had been placed inside the one the Legitimacy Kingdom had picked up and Skuld had snuck in during the blackout to mix it into the Object where it would send out its illicit data.

“This is the rescue team! Understood. Once you’ve finished your job, meet up with the escape route team. It’d feel pretty stupid getting caught now, wouldn’t it? Don’t worry about us!!”

“Heivia, could you explain the situation there? Do you need any help?”

“Goddamn that skinny boy!! He couldn’t wait around and broke out on his own!! He used the world’s lamest trick to vanish from his cell and we have no idea where he is!!”

Part 6

Quenser looked annoyed as he held up his alcohol lamp made from a liquor bottle.

He had climbed down the trapdoor's ladder and found a long underground passageway. It was probably hand dug, but the walls were not made of dirt or stone. They most resembled rotting wooden walls, but that was not quite accurate either.

They were coffins.

And they were crammed full of white skeletons perfunctorily wrapped in rotting cloth.

"Are these catacombs? …Dammit."

The place looked more than a century old. After that much time, the corpses looked more like fossils, but he did not feel like relaxing and taking a deep breath. He could see some burial items of gold or jewels here and there, but he felt no desire to pocket any of them.

More than just the one tunnel, there seemed to be a large web of them with the monastery at the center.

With nothing to guide him, he relied on his instincts until he ran into something other than a coffin-lined passageway.

It was a small room.

There were no coffins here.

"What is this…?"

However, it was far from a comforting place. He saw chairs and a bed, but this was certainly not a rest area for the grave keeper. They were made of sinister-looking steel and they were designed to hold the victims' arms and legs in place with chains and belts. Thanks to the paint, they were not even rusted.

Hanging on the wall were a number of whips…or rather, metal rods with a variety of attachments. There were also hammers and large pliers which did nothing to put Quenser's mind at ease.

There was a single small desk in the corner for someone other than a victim. The drawer had a book's worth of parchment full of handwritten text. It looked to be centuries old. It explained how to use and maintain the tools.

(After the old age of witch hunts died down and became taboo, did the people who couldn't forget the taste of blood hide their collection in a distant land?)

That raised questions about the coffins covering the passageway walls. The monastery had been built to close people in like a prison and these catacombs and a torture chamber were hidden below it. Quenser did not like imagining what kind of life had been lived here.

(This world really is shit if things like this can cross the ocean and take root.)

But his life was more important than divulging dark secrets of history.

He refocused his mind, but he came to a stop just before stepping out into another passageway.

He glanced over at the steel bed again and traced his fingers across it.

"Don't tell me… You have to be kidding."

Then he started down a random passageway. Several layers of rotting coffins covered both walls and he used his alcohol lamp to inspect a few of the skeletons.

And then…

"Quenser…?"

A voice reached him from another passageway.

He held his alcohol lamp in that direction and saw a twintail girl in a Faith Organization uniform. It was the very uniform he had given her.

The student felt sweat on his brow.

“Sk…uld?”

“Thank goodness. Heivia said you’d vanished from the monastery, so I thought you might be here.”

He breathed a sigh of relief.

And she gently placed her hands on Quenser’s shoulders.

“I don’t like saying this to someone from the Legitimacy Kingdom, but I owe you one. I can’t have you dying here.”

“…”

“Let’s get out of here. The Faith Organization soldiers know about this place, so it’s used as an emergency escape route for the Elites and officers. The other soldiers should show up here soon.”

That was a perfectly reasonable point.

If the Legitimacy Kingdom had put together a rescue operation, Skuld would have known the maintenance base better than anyone. And she would know the escape routes better than a normal Faith Organization soldier. There was nothing odd about her showing up in the catacombs before anyone else.

But something caught at Quenser’s mind.

He recalled what Urd and Verdandi had said.

Skuld was a serial killer.

She could not control her violence and aggression, so she could not function in normal society. She was extremely skilled as a Pilot Elite, but she was so broken as a human being that she could not maintain the bare minimum of dignity without the framework of

the military protecting her. Plus, her murders were highly contagious and she would create a negative boom of copycat killers if word got out.

"…? What is it?"

"N-nothing."

Skuld looked puzzled and Quenser shook his head.

Either way, they could not stand around here. He would be in trouble of the Faith Organization soldiers found him here.

For that reason, he followed Skuld through the labyrinthine catacombs.

She did not seem even remotely hesitant to defenselessly turn her back toward him.

Who was telling the truth?

Urd and Verdandi had only been speaking inside a small interrogation room. He had no objective proof to back them up, so it was entirely possible they had been lying to turn him against Skuld.

"Have you ever used this place before?"

"During the evacuation drills. But I was surrounded by bodyguards the whole time."

She readily answered.

"I know why you might be feeling down. Not only is the place full of musty old coffins, but you saw that old torture chamber, didn't you? When you see things like that, it's hard to agree with the people who glorify the 'good old days'."

"Yeah, I know what you mean."

Skuld had no reason to betray Quenser after coming this far.

She would have gained nothing from risking her life on a mission to rescue him.

But she had still come to the Faith Organization maintenance base zone which was the most dangerous place for her.

Normally, he should trust the person who had risked her life for him more than the words of enemies like Urd and Verdandi. She had proved she was on his side through actions instead of mere words.

“By the way, Skuld.”

“Yes?”

It was a casual conversation.

“Why were some of the bones over there oddly new? The flesh had clearly been chemically stripped away.”

A dull shock exploded in the bridge of his nose.

It took him a few moments to realize what had happened.

While taking the lead, Skuld had turned around and swung a backhand blow at him.

“Gah!?”

His hands flailed wildly and the alcohol lamp slipped from his grasp. The liquor bottle rolled away, but that may have been fortunate.

Just like a Molotov cocktail, wet flames spread across the floor and then rose like a wall.

Before his dizzy vision could recover, Skuld grabbed his collar with both hands.

She was planning to throw him into the flames.

He shuddered when he realized that, but as a student with no real

hand-to-hand combat experience, he did not want to begin grappling even with a slender girl.

Before he lost his balance, he lowered his hips.

Skuld was holding his collar, so her hands were pulled straight down. She was placed in an unbalanced crouching position and she had been shifting her center of gravity forward to push Quenser.

The skinny boy had no way of knowing it, but the ninja of the distant Island Nation had used a certain technique to lose any pursuers.

They would crouch down into a ball just after turning a corner so their pursuer would trip over them upon running around the corner.

Skuld's body rotated vertically.

It was like an overhead throw.

And she was headed right toward the wall of Molotov cocktail flames she had tried to use herself.

"Gyah!!"

Her slender body landed right in the wet flames.

Quenser held his head, unsteadily stood up, and tried to check on the situation.

"Pant, pant!!"

(Dammit, I trusted you. I really did! I thought the day might come that I would have a domineering Elite treat me like her big brother!!)

But life was not that kind.

The Faith Organization uniform was not just a synthetic track suit. It had some level of fire resistance.

Skuld broke through the wall of flames and charged forward on all

fours like an animal. He could not escape to the left or right in this narrow passageway. She tackled him at waist height and he finally lost his balance. His back slammed into the ground.

“Gbah!! Cough, cough!!”

“Ahh, ahh. Why’d you have to notice that?”

Skuld climbed on top of Quenser and giggled.

The wall of flames behind her cast a dark shadow over her face.

“This was my secret base. I just about danced for joy when I found it before anyone else. So why did you have to find it!?”

She reached out her hands toward his neck. She was planning to throttle him. The boy frantically struggled with his arms, but Skuld moved her hips on top of him to pin them down below her hands.

“Then…then what Urd and Verdandi said was true!?”

“I wouldn’t know what they told you.”

“That you’re a serial killer!!”

“Hee hee. Oh, that one’s 100% true.”

“Then why did you risk your life to come rescue me? There had to have been other ways of earning enough points for the Legitimacy Kingdom to let you in!”

“Because…”

Instead of killing him quick, she took her time to enjoy it while pinning his wrists down.

She brought her face close enough for their noses to touch and then her mouth split open in a smile.

“You seemed like such a delicious target from the moment I saw you. Macho men don’t do it for me and slender women just aren’t enough. Yes, I prefer androgynous and feminine guys. When I see one, I just can’t stop myself.”

“…!!”

Quenser’s throat grew dry.

Was she saying she had rescued him because she had not wanted the Faith Organization or her older sisters to steal her prey?

“Your actions are completely inconsistent. I can accept the initial

surprise attack disguised as a defeat, but the Draupnir swarm and the Princess's loss in the second battle had to have been complete coincidence. If you had made even a single mistake, you would've died. Are you trying to say you planned all this out, including those coincidences!?"

"None of that matters," she readily told him. "I kill as many people as I can at the moment. You don't need to obsessively plan out a hobby, do you? And it's not something you can keep yourself from doing, right?"

"It was all…adlibbed…?"

"I always make the decision that will lead to the most deaths in that moment. That's what I do. That just happened to coincide with a few other events and – next thing I knew – I found myself on a rescue operation. But what I must do is the same no matter what happens. I will indulge in my hobby. I will bathe in blood and death. No life could be more fulfilling!!"

She was insane.

That was the logic of an utter lunatic.

Urd and Verdandi had been right. If Skuld managed to earn the Legitimacy Kingdom's trust and blended into a safe country, she would definitely slip away from her observers, escape, and kill as many defenseless civilians as she liked. The police, guards, and other forces stationed in the safe countries would not be enough. Not only would they fail to stop her, they would lose their lives as an exciting detour to spice up her killings.

"Skuld…!!" shouted Quenser as she pinned him down.

He was answered with a head butt.

Skuld's forehead struck him again and again while his hands were restrained. His forehead, nose, and cheekbones strained under the weight of the hammer-like blows. His consciousness faded and he could tell his body was going limp.

She likely wanted to savor the weakening of his breath.

She let go of his limp wrists and her fingertips crawled to his chest. Then she applied tremendous pressure like she was performing CPR.

“Gweah!! Agwah!?”

“Hee hee hee. Ee hee hee ee hee. Hee hee hee ha ha ha ha ha ha ah ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha!!”

Still straddling Quenser, Skuld arched her back and laughed at the top of her lungs.

The act of harming him must have filled her with ecstasy because irregular tremors ran through her small body.

“Yes, yes. This is the feeling. I can feel the invisible life in my hands!! Yes, that’s right! Killing isn’t something you see, hear, taste, or smell! You feel it!! You touch it with your fingertips! It’s all about recalling that invisible shape and truly experiencing it!!”

Quenser’s mouth opened and closed in search of oxygen and Skuld’s fingers crawled further across his chest. But this was not another meaningless heart massage. Her hands drew ever closer to his throat.

He shook his head in protest, but that changed nothing.

She was breathing heavily on top of him. Her cheeks were flushed. Her ten fingers wrapped gently around his throat. The two thumbs softly stroked his Adam’s apple. She seemed to enjoy how it moved around in her hands.

“War never mattered. In fact, death happens far too quickly in those clean wars where you can kill at the pull of lever. You can’t feel it and enjoy it!! This was a wonderful place. Pliers, hammers, saws, and so much more… I still think my bare hands are the best, but using a tool and feeling the sensation reach my wrist wasn’t bad either!!”

“Sku-..ghweh!?”

He tried to say something, but she started crushing his Adam’s apple below her thumbs.

She seemed to be cutting off the blood to his head more than the air to his lungs. He was afraid his entire head would inflate and burst from within.

Had his guess been right?

The metal bed in that torture chamber had been strangely shiny. That was thanks to human sweat…no, oils. That meant it had been used recently, not just centuries ago.

He had refused to believe it, but he may have just been in denial.

Pilot Elites came in all types.

They each had their own reason to pilot their Object: money, fame, a lifestyle, social status, faith, etc.

He had not wanted to believe that an Elite would pilot an Object simply to enjoy the act of killing.

“Gh…eh…!!”

“Yes, yes!! This is the feeling. I was completely right about you, Quenser! You have the most wonderful soul!!”

Her small butt wiggled on top of him as she shouted in delight.

Meanwhile, Quenser could no longer resist in the slightest.

Was it over? Would this lunatic who had confused war with a hobby either strangle him to death or snap his neck?

“…Hh…”

How long had it been since he had stopped breathing?

His mind grew blank. He lost all sense of time. He could no longer see Skuld’s face as she laughed loudly and arched back again and again as she relished the pleasure of this act.

And then a scorching and trembling impact ran through him.

Skuld’s hands went limp.

With his windpipe and blood vessels released, Quenser's mind grew clear. He still felt dizzy, but he did his best to think about what had just happened to him.

(It was a lot like when I screw up some work and get an electric shock… Was it a stungun? No, a projectile spark shot?)

Someone must have fired some wired electrode pins at Skuld and released a high voltage current that reached Quenser through her body.

She wobbled while sitting on top of him.

He followed her gaze and saw another girl in a special suit much like the one Skuld had worn.

"Ver…dandi…?" muttered Quenser.

After looking back and forth between her sister and her prey, Skuld tried to press her weight down on Quenser's neck once more. She did not bother begging for her life. She silently focused all of her efforts on killing before her own life could be taken.

Another high-voltage current surged through her.

Skuld's small body convulsed.

"You…"

Verdandi walked over and used the bottom of the handgun-like spark shot to hit Skuld on the cheek.

"You are a disgrace to the Faith Organization!!"

With a loud noise, Skuld's body finally went entirely limp. She fell off Quenser and collapsed onto her side.

Verdandi simply glared at the boy whose vision was flashing in and out, who could not get up, and who continued to cough.

But when she heard footsteps rushing down another passageway, she swiftly got to work.

She pulled out a grenade, placed it in Quenser's hand, and artlessly pulled the pin.

"You won't die as long as you hold onto the lever. Your friends can take care of the rest, you burden."

With that said, she hoisted Skuld up over her shoulder with the electrode pins still stabbed into her. She likely intended to withdraw while the Legitimacy Kingdom soldiers were busy with Quenser.

"With Skuld back, we have no more use for you. You were reported as a POW in the Faith Organization and no one really knew what to do with a student like you anyway. I'll overlook you this time." Verdandi spoke as a Faith Organization Pilot Elite. "But just this once. Don't forget that your First Generation is powerless in the face of our tactics."

"…"

There was nothing he could say.

Verdandi was right.

Keeping his mind from falling into darkness and making sure he kept his hand on the grenade was the most he could manage.

Part 7

Heivia and the others arrived late, dealt with the grenade in Quenser's hand, and successfully retrieved him.

While it had not been part of the original plan, they used the underground catacombs to escape outside the Faith Organization base zone and met up with the escape route team.

The dirty potatoes piled back into the trucks they had arrived in and returned to the Legitimacy Kingdom pile of rubble.

Skuld did not come back with them.

When Quenser first explained why, Heivia had not understood him.

"You're kidding, right? Skuld was using war to enjoy her hobby as a serial killer!?"

"Yes. She almost killed me, so there's no doubting it. She hates macho men and thinks a slender woman isn't enough, so some kind of switch inside her completely breaks when she sees an androgynous guy."

Quenser rubbed his bruised neck in annoyance.

"Her reason for killing sounded pretty Faith Organization-y. Something about being able to feel someone's invisible life in the instant you kill them. Although I bet the Faith Organization housewives would be pretty shocked to hear about it."

"But the Faith Organization is still using the military to protect her and letting her pilot an Object instead of giving her a dishonorable discharge, right?"

"That's just how useful she is. They benefit enough from her that it's worth turning a blind eye to the risk," spat out Quenser. "We've run into Urd and Verdandi already, but what's Skuld's strategy? What distance does she fight from? More importantly, how skilled is she and how are her battle senses? We know nothing about her, but

there’s a chance she’ll be piloting the Trinity Style against us next time. She’s one hell of a dangerous opponent.”

Part 8

She was thoroughly beaten.

She was a lump of pain.

The bodyguards paled, but Verdandi did not stop. Urd did not directly join in, but she calmly observed it without stopping it. Unlike a professional interrogator, these Elites did not know where the borderline between life and death was, so their punishment contained a unique sort of danger.

Skuld's entire body had grown limp as she lay face-down and twitched on the floor. Verdandi grabbed her by the hair and spoke to her from close range.

"Listen, you disgrace."

"…"

"Do you see now that someone as broken as you can only live in the military? But keep this up, and you'll lose the military too. So work. Work for the Faith Organization."

Skuld's back creaked as her head was pulled up by the hair. She did not have it in her to respond.

"Normally, this would have warranted an immediate execution, but you did manage to throw the Legitimacy Kingdom into confusion. From here on, there is no sisterly love between us. It's up to you to keep yourself alive."

Verdandi had beaten the girl until she could no longer speak a word of agreement or dissent.

"The Norn is the birdcage prepared for you. We will control you. This is your chance to make a comeback. If you don't prove yourself useful here, you'll have to spend the rest of your life in a hospital room with nothing but white walls to look at."

Skuld gasped for breath and looked up at her sister's face.

Verdandi smiled fiercely back down at her.

"Destroy the Legitimacy Kingdom Object. I want to see what you can do when you take this seriously."

She had no more need for her, so Verdandi let go of Skuld's hair.

Skuld's head produced a soft and wet splat when it hit the floor. The bodyguards quickly called over the medical team, but the two older sisters looked away from the serial killer and walked off as if they had lost interest.

Those two Elites left and a military doctor yelled into Skuld's ear.

Nevertheless, an evil smile remained on her lips.

Chapter 7

Part 1

The information is protected by high-level military compliance protocols, so we can only obtain fragments of it. Even so, piecing that together should reveal something.

Now, let us review what we know about Skuld Silent-Third.

Overview of the Norn Program

This project was established in order to fill the hole in the current system that requires everything to rely on a single Object and Pilot Elite. For information on the Object side of the project, see the other paper. Here, I would like to refer more to the concept of a general-use Pilot Elite.

Using the same development program on multiple genetically-similar people will implant identical traits in multiple Elites. By remaking the one-to-one relationship between person and weapon, multiple people can share the work and personnel can be swapped out if the unforeseen occurs. That will be Step 1.

If it succeeds, we can avoid being stuck with an entirely useless Object if the Pilot Elite is assassinated.

And the success of this project could also create a starting point for mass-producing Pilot Elites through cloning technology or the like. (n.b.: Whether or not Central will provide religious ethics approval is always a question.)

Journalist's Voice Recording not Used in an Article

Verdandi: "Yeah, let's not be all formal. We're sick and tired of that shallow and flowery way they talk about us."

Urd: "Yes. They call us the goddesses or saints of the Norn Program,

but we're really no more than spares. The government propaganda makes it look like all three of us are working together to fight, but Verdandi and I really only just barely make the grade as Elites."

Verdandi: "We use our ingenuity to make up for what we lack, so you should really praise us for that."

Urd: "So the Norn's only real Elite is that girl…Skuld."

Verdandi: "Yeah, she's a genius in the truest sense of the word."

Urd: "But there is a major problem with her personality. We hold her reins and prevent her from going on a true rampage."

Verdandi: "What's gotten you so quiet? I thought you asked people questions for a living. You can't exactly do your job if you're dumbfounded, can you?"

Urd: "Cut him some slack, Verdandi. Who knows how his life would be destroyed if he put this in an article. Hee hee."

Confiscated Journal

I don't understand what life is.

It isn't something you can see or hear.

Everyone says to treat life with care.

But I don't understand what it is. No one does.

It must be something like water or air.

You can't understand how much you need it while you're breathing it and taking it for granted. But once you don't have enough, you realize just how important it is.

So to learn about life, you must approach that final limit.

Confession Recorded by a Counselor

Yes, yes. Please forgive me. Yes, please find it in yourself to forgive me. I understood Saint Skuld's sickness. It is true she has been at the mercy of her inborn nature, but it is my responsibility for not treating it and even allowing it to exacerbate in how I interacted with her. An agent explained to me that this would protect the world and that it was necessary for the Norn Program and the Berserker Program that branched off of that, but that is not enough to wholly eliminate my guilt. Yes, this was all due to my immoral-…? What? A blackout? What is-…ksssssshhhhhhhh!!

…You should have just done as you were told.

Voicemail Seeking a Personal Appointment

Message left at 1:40 AM on August 19.

"Hey, Tony! Is it sunny enough for some bikini babes where you're at? I'm on the other side of the world suffering through the damp rainy season. But anyway, I've got some good news for you. No, no. I'm not asking to borrow any money. …It wasn't what I was after, but I happened to get a hell of a video out here in this battlefield country. It was dark and I only had my handheld equipment, so you can only see the shadows, but it's gotta be you-know-who enjoying her 'hobby'. You know what I mean, right? It's what you wanted more than anything back there behind your desk! You probably think it's a fake and that I'd post it online to become a hero if I really had the video of the century, but if I uploaded something this dangerous as an individual, it'd only look like some cruel snuff film. I need the reputation of the press! I really wish I could send you the video right away, but since this is a battlefield country, it seems like everything but the landline phone's been cut off. Anyway, I want an appointment for the very second I'm back in the country. Listen, this is the crucial moment. Don't forget I went to you first since we've been friends for so long!"

…

Would you like to delete the message?

A Freelance Writer's Notebook

New soldiers occasionally vanish from Saint Skuld's unit. There are a number of rumors: they get fed up with the battlefield after learning how tough life is there, they tried to earn some money on the side through smuggling and were dishonorably discharged, they foolishly tried to make a pass at Saint Skuld and were eliminated by the Valkyries, etc. But my intuition tells me the truth lies elsewhere. All of those explanations are almost eerily satisfying. Almost like someone planted the evidence after the fact.

And then there was the incident from a few days back. It only received a quick article on an online news site, but that's when it hit me.

A soldier vanished in a safe country instead of a battlefield country. He was apparently close to Saint Skuld and acting as her bodyguard while she was on leave. If he was fed up with his job, it would be much more logical to vanish in a safe country than a battlefield country, but I bet…no, I know that isn't the truth.

I know about her "hobby". Or I think I do.

It always happened in battlefield countries where proper criminal investigations don't take place. But this was different. It happened in a safe country, a territory controlled by the rules of us pacifists. I doubt they'll have made a mistake, but it couldn't have been easy covering this one up. Searching for any slight opening here might be a good way of reaching the truth.

(The next page is covered in dried blood and cannot be opened.)

Deletion Request

All,

To protect Saint Skuld Silent-Third's life and lifestyle from saboteurs and anti-establishment groups, the following personal information must be deleted. Most of the information is managed by the military, but a few pieces still exist in a variety of media from before she joined. They all exist on the server such that they can only be accessed with a special tool, but please delete them ASAP.

1. Suspicion of Animal Abuse in the Rabbit Cage of Midgard Elementary School.

(Including the ghost stories on the school's unofficial site)

2. Suspicion of Assault and Battery at the Same School (2 Incidents)

(Including the posts on message boards and SNS)

3. Suspicion of Serial Arson Targeting the Homes of Students and Teachers at the Same School (4 Incidents)

(Including an online request to a private investigator and a dismissed bill of indictment)

In addition to the above documents, please search for and delete any similar documents. If anyone requests the release of this information or works to block the deletion thereof, please report it to your contact.

Accountant's Memo

About Norn.

Authorization from Central → A clue → What would be best?

Important! When laying the groundwork, make sure this is not confused with the group working on the practical use of cloning.

From 4 to 5. Maybe one more to help things run more smoothly.

(Adjustments for the hidden jobs like assassination and cover-ups takes money, so one more.)

Is the military funding from the Venerable Elder not enough? Hmm…

Reduce the number of personnel? ✖The number can go up, but it can't go down.

Ask for more? No good: Any more and the bank account management system might discover the Venerable Elder's expenses.

Use a "woman"? → Too reckless with the religious ethics judgments. It might rub them the wrong way.

(But it could work as a threat against any helpers who refuse to agree. If I list up each of their family issues such as an overbearing wife or a deteriorating relationship with an adopted son or biological son, I can mark the ones for which that "bomb" might work.)

Other sources of funds… Hmm.

Berserker.

Draupnir. ✔This one.

Submitting a report on the uses of those edible insects, doubling or tripling the supply research budget, and then cutting away the fat might be a good compromise. (←Write up a clean copy before reporting to the Venerable Elder.)

Lead Article in an Agency PR Magazine

Monthly Asgard April Issue!

This month I'm putting the spotlight on Saints Urd, Verdandi, and Skuld, the three sisters who control the Second Generation Norn. These sisters have both power and beauty and I would like to introduce you to their noble minds and the spotless radiance of

their lives. Let's start with Saint Skuld. At the age of 14, she looks like she would still be entirely dependent on her family's love, but she has fully parted with that indulgence of her peers. She has a fully-formed benevolent personality and genius piloting skills and she is the solid wall protecting our lives, lifestyles, and dignity. She is the ultimate…

Part 2

It was pouring rain.

Thick and dark rain clouds covered the entire sky.

It was supposed to be the dry season in the Antsiranana District, but that did not matter. According to the satellite, the rivers were more than full and the land was flooded as far as the eye could see. The maintenance base zone's location had been chosen based on geographic factors, so it had escaped the flooding, but waist-high muddy water could be found not far outside the base. And it continued all the way to the horizon.

"This is what they call heat pollution, isn't it?"

Silver-haired and busty Frolaytia toyed with her bangs in annoyance while holding her long, narrow kiseru in her mouth.

"The industrialization of the mainland across the ocean has raised the upper atmospheric temperature by two or three degrees. As their operations pick up, the atmosphere grows unstable."

"What's the situation?" asked Quenser.

Frolaytia breathed out some sweet smoke and looked the other way.

She looked to the Baby Magnum having its armor and weapons swapped out in the center of the maintenance bay.

"The Faith Organization is sure to have noticed the approaching transportation fleet of submarines and hovercraft. But they've chosen to tolerate its presence. They must be waiting for us to finish our maintenance."

The base's vehicles were mostly just a pile of rubble, so new ones had been sent in for an almost wholesale replacement of the base.

"They must be monitoring us. They're only overlooking this because the materials are flowing in and not out. If we tried to evacuate the

officers or the classified servers, they would attack and give the fleet a watery grave."

"Could we not evacuate in time with some emergency submarines?"

"That might work for a VIP or two, but there are too many of us. Besides, the Trinity Style is made of countless Dvergr work robots, so it can change shape whenever it wants. The area is flooded so badly we can't see the ground, so it will almost certainly be using an air cushion. That means it can head out to sea, so attempting a game of tag would be too reckless."

"But then why are they doing this?"

"Why are they prepared to respond at a moment's notice and yet giving us this chance? Have you forgotten, Quenser? The Trinity Style…no, Skuld's rampage began when she pretended to be defeated in order to defeat our Princess more easily." Frolaytia smiled darkly. "If their military is willing to protect her despite all the problems she causes, she must earn them a ton of money. But I bet opinions are growing much more split within the Faith Organization. So they want a way to test Skuld's loyalty. Or perhaps she needs a purification ceremony to clear her name."

"She's making up for all this by crushing the Baby Magnum? She wants to shift all the blame to the Princess?" Quenser sounded disgusted. "And just like they wanted, we chose to stay on Experimental Battlefield Madagascar."

"Well, the higher ups wanted an early withdrawal to bring back Skuld and all of her classified information. Now that we can't do that, we're back to the original plan: kill the enemy. When you think about it, it's a simple order."

"But…"

Quenser started to speak but trailed off.

Frolaytia nodded and continued for him.

"I understand. It all looks like we're under Skuld's control. Two world powers are working together to supply a hunting ground for

a young girl's hobby. It's pathetic. In that way, maybe she is a genius. A serial killer who just kills people will be caught before long, but the truly dangerous ones understand society well enough to blend in despite their abnormality. She has the right instincts to mess with things beyond her reach and bring the current trends and public opinion to her side."

"…"

Quenser heard her out, but he actually disagreed.

He doubted Skuld Silent-Third had thought any of this through.

Too much of this had been unpredictable: the battle with the Baby Magnum, the insect swarm, the Legitimacy Kingdom's defeat in the second battle, the rescue operation, and her capture by Verdandi after trying to kill Quenser during that rescue operation. It had all been adlibbed and none of it could have been planned out.

She was simply snatching up the delicious-looking dessert she saw, as if she had happened across a food stand. She was not even worried about how much was left in her wallet.

And yet she had made it this far.

It was all so solid that it seemed to follow a single line throughout.

It was a blindfolded tightrope walk that could have met disaster at any moment. She was insane enough to continue laughing throughout. She had had no plan for success and she would have been thrown to the ground if she made even a slight misstep. That was all Skuld was doing.

If she was a genius, that was the important point.

She planned nothing, she only adlibbed, and she always made the choice that would lead to the most deaths in the moment.

That was all she had done, and yet she had thoroughly manipulated two world powers at once.

It was almost like some kind of goddess was embracing Skuld

Silent-Third from behind.

But was that a goddess of fate, a goddess of victory, or a mysterious goddess of death?

Part 3

It was time for the mission.

“You’ve gotta be kidding me. We’re fighting one of the Objects that ended the nuclear age, not going fishing. Why do we have to rely on rubber boats now?”

They were riding a small rubber boat barely large enough for 10 people that had an engine-powered propeller on the back. Several dozen of them were lined up side by side as they travelled down along the flooded muddy river.

They could hardly believe this had been a dry and cracked wasteland just the other day.

They could no longer tell where the large river dividing the two armies’ territory had been.

It was only water, water, and more water as far as the eye could see. And it was far too muddy to tell how deep it was. Quenser felt his skin crawl at how this seemed more like the middle of a lake than a river, but Heivia was in a much worse state as he controlled the boat. Unlike a lake, there was a powerful current and they would be swept downstream in no time if he grew careless.

“Come to think of it, what’s the Princess doing this time? Her static electricity system needs naval floats to cross rivers and oceans, but what about in this pouring rain?”

“She can force herself across some gathered water with insoluble repellant, but this environment is pretty bad. Well, the old lady and the others were doing something with welding equipment, so I bet she’s had the floats installed. I mean, it’s completely flooded out here.”

“But the floats have a shark anchor weight that extends straight down. Won’t that hit the ground?”

“That’s why the old lady and the others were working so hard. They were cutting that away.”

The naval equipment would let the Baby Magnum float, but it would have trouble balancing. Having a handicap in battle was no laughing matter at this point.

Only two or three people were on each 10-man boat and the two idiots were the only ones on their boat. The rest of the space was filled with spear-like equipment thicker than metal rods and a giant attached crossbow that fired them.

The weapon looked a lot like the ballistae used centuries ago to bring down stone castles.

“Do you know what we need to do?”

“Yeah, this plan is a lot like a research project. We fire arrowheads full of aluminum and iron oxide at the Trinity Style so those giant-ass arrows will fuse onto it, then balloons filled with carbon dioxide gas to increase the air resistance and slow down its movements. If that lets the Princess shoot the thing, we win… like hell that’ll work! That thing’s moving around at Mach 5 or 10 and it can shoot down every tactical missile you could shoot at it!!”

“But the chemical fusion has already been proven to work… of course, that was just the old lady and the others attaching them while it was feigning defeat.”

“They just fired the arrows at the Object while it was sitting there… and when it was pretending to be stopped to trick us. That’s nothing like a real battle!!”

“The Trinity Style will have to keep a constant eye on us while it fights. That’s enough of a plan right there; we can’t think about actually defeating it, we just have to take some of the pressure off of the Princess so she can win.”

“But if we stand out, it’ll fire its plasma and lasers. Our skin isn’t made of orichalcum. If it even grazes us, we’ll be vaporized!!”

Complaining would not change anything about their situation.

They could see some silhouettes floating on the muddy river that spread to the horizon.

They were boxy silhouettes, and Faith Organization soldiers were likely riding them.

“What the hell are those!? Are they floating around in armored trucks with propellers attached!? They’re making me feel like a neighborhood kid begging for a toy!!”

“Check out what’s beyond them.”

Quenser was referring to something beyond the floating armored trucks. A giant form could be seen rising above the horizon.

Even at this distance, tingling fear spread across Quenser’s entire body.

It was the Faith Organization Second Generation Trinity Style.

No…

“Skuld Silent-Third!!”

Part 4

First, the Legitimacy Kingdom rubber boats clashed with the Faith Organization armored light trucks.

Powerful gunshots rang out as the heavy machineguns attached to the truck roofs roared to life. Each and every shot was an extraordinary bullet as thick as someone's thumb. Every minute, two thousand bullets larger than the average anti-materiel rifle round were fired. A single hit would tear someone to pieces.

The Legitimacy Kingdom responded with assault rifles and light machineguns. They were quieter than the heavy machineguns that weighed several dozen kilograms, but the armored light trucks had sacrificed defense for the ability to float. These bullets were meant for heavy equipment and they could pierce through to the inside.

Both sides were risking their lives.

Sparks flew and pillars of water continually rose from the muddy river.

But even that exchange of lives was no more than a farce.

The true clash began soon thereafter.

The Baby Magnum and the Trinity Style both fired their main cannons.

The blinding light and deafening noise was enough for Quenser to nearly forget the reality of his situation.

Giant ripples expanded from the Objects and they threatened to capsize the rubber boats.

Meanwhile, the two mechanical monsters made quick and precise movements while firing main cannons powerful enough to instantly dig up and vaporize a nuclear shelter.

At some point, the firefight with the Faith Organization armored

light trucks had ended.

Their heads were too rattled to aim properly and they even had difficulty tracking the passage of time. The one Object had a belt connecting the main cannon and giant magazine attached on opposite sides.

“The container cannon that uses the elevator? Are they starting with Urd!?”

“Enough with your technical obsession! We just have to do what we can. Load one of the ballista arrows. If you don’t have anything else to do, get to work!!”

The side effects of the Object battle were enough to tear their ranks apart. A rubber boat up ahead of Quenser and Heivia’s had already prepared their several-meter-long crossbow. Once they were in range, they pulled the trigger to fire an arrow thicker than an iron rod.

The sound it made was far too heavy to think of as a bow firing.

Even without the aluminum or iron oxide in the arrowhead, a hit from that would tear a human to pieces.

But…

“Gwah!!”

“You idiot! Look away, Quenser! Don’t watch it!!”

A light as bright as welding soon followed. It had been easily intercepted by one of the Trinity Style’s lasers before it hit.

It had been as casual as shooing away a fly in front of your face.

But a second laser took revenge by vaporizing the leading rubber boat and the soldiers aboard it.

“Dammit! Jump in!!”

Heivia switched off their boat’s engine, grabbed Quenser by the

collar, and dove into the muddy river. A downpour of light continued even as the enemy Object fought the Princess. Several boats were blown away.

Quenser and Heivia's boat was one of them.

The water was only about waist deep, but the current was too swift to stand properly. It felt like someone was grabbing and pulling at their legs, so the two boys' arms flailed in search of something to help them float.

They grabbed onto a rubber boat by pure coincidence.

It was not the one they had been on and they had no idea what had become of the soldiers who had been using it.

They climbed onboard and caught their breath.

"I knew this wouldn't work!! We're just a nice target!!"

"That thing's an acoustic scan specialist, right? It might be safer to put on a snorkel and dive below the muddy river."

"And what kind of landmark would we swim toward when it's that muddy? There's a hell of a current and we'd end up kilometers downstream before we knew it!!"

And without their support, the Princess was on her own.

They may not have been any help in the first place, but that would still put her at a disadvantage.

Urd's container shells continued to hit the water below the Princess. They likely contained liquid nitrogen or something similar. The Princess had to take further evasive action so she was not caught in the resultant blocks of ice, but then the Trinity Style ignored its previous "habits" and rushed right in toward her.

The main cannon changed form.

"Dammit, is it Verdandi now!?"

It started with a powerful laser beam.

When the Princess quickly dodged, the Trinity Style moved as if inviting her to dance. Their actions seemed synchronized except with the Trinity Style circling to the Baby Magnum's side.

The upcoming second shot had caused great damage to the Princess last time.

But things were different this time.

The main cannon changed again. It changed to someone else's.

Part 5

“Everything is set up for you.”

Verdandi spoke frankly in one of the Norn’s three cockpits.

“This one is yours. Do it, Skuld.”

Part 6

Verdandi's special attack started by throwing her opponent off balance and taking up a checkmate position that allowed her to kill them with her next attack, but there were some ways to fight it if you knew it was coming. The Princess swiftly slid the Baby Magnum to the side to escape outside the movable range of her enemy's main cannon.

She might have perfectly avoided Verdandi's laser beam like that.

In that case, what happened next?

Not even Quenser understood what had happened as he watched it all from the side.

A terrifying flash of light burned into the entire world.

The Trinity Style had changed form. It only had the one main cannon on the side, but it hung down like an Island Nation katana sheath and the entire main cannon seemed to swing around using a booster.

It was not a laser beam or a rapid-fire beam cannon. Nor was it a railgun or coilgun. If anything, it reminded him of a low-stability plasma cannon, but that probably was not it either.

"Gyaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh

Quenser covered his face with his hands and screamed. He writhed in pain in the boat.

His eyes hurt so bad he feared he would never open them again.

Even so, he repeatedly replayed the scene burned into his brain.

Something like a saber or blade of light had burst from the Trinity Style's main cannon. It had looked like a blowtorch's bluish-white flame stretched to several kilometers long.

It had swung around as if hopping up diagonally.

More than just the main cannon, the entire Object had rotated.

The Princess had quickly dodged. She had even forced down the repulsion of the static electricity to sink her Object down. That slight distance had saved her. A few of her main cannons had been mowed down like weeds, but she had avoided a fatal blow.

(What…in the hell…was that!?)

At the most basic level, the Trinity Style's main cannon was a laser space elevator tilted on its side. Urd fired metal container shells from there while Verdandi directly fired the powerful laser beam at the enemy.

Then what about Skuld?

How did she use the elevator to produce mass destruction?

(Oh, I get it…)

Quenser reached a conclusion in his lightless imagination while his eyeballs stills suffered from stabbing pain.

(The elevator is made to fire a powerful laser on the bottom of the container to expand the air and propel it forward. I've heard the heat can destroy the bottom of the container and turn it to plasma if the power is too high. Is she vaporizing the entire container to create a powerful plasma current that fires out like a blowtorch or flamethrower!?)

"…enser…Quenser!! Skinny boy! Get up already!!"

The boy finally focused on the outside world when he heard someone shouting in his ear.

He shook his head and got up as rain poured down on the boat.

"Dammit… I've figured out the Trinity Style's main cannon. It's creating plasma without a low-stability plasma cannon's special gas…"

“Did you receive a message from heaven during your near-death experience? If the angel was a hot blonde, you’d better introduce me.”

Meanwhile, Skuld’s plasma blade fired again and again. The din was loud enough to nearly burst their eardrums, but it did not blind them like the first shot had.

There was a simple reason for that.

“What? Fog?”

“That’s probably water vapor. Its main cannon is too hot, so it’s boiling the muddy water around it without even grazing it. This might even trigger a water vapor explosion.”

“…”

They could see a giant mass glowing orange beyond the sauna-like haze.

But it was not the Baby Magnum. The Trinity Style’s own armor was faintly glowing due to the residual heat of its own plasma blades.

If that was happening to the Trinity Style, how badly damaged would the Princess be as she constantly fled from it?

“That’s way too hot… How can it be melting nuke-resistant armor without even grazing it? That’s more like a shotgun or flamethrower. You can’t just dodge a single point. It covers an entire surface to keep its opponent from getting away.”

“Then what do we do!? How do we support the Princess!? If there’s nothing we can do, maybe we should flip over the boat, cling to it under the water, and pretend we were hit. Yeah, if we’re lucky the war treaties might protect us!”

“That’s not gonna work with that serial killer. She’ll slaughter us with a grin on her face.”

Quenser felt sick to his stomach just saying it.

The 5km blade was perfect for mid-range. And if she had free use of that, she should have been able to slice the Princess apart right off the bat. Even if Urd and Verdandi were not experts at using it, they could have borrowed the method to confuse the Princess. However, they had not done so. The reason why was simple: the weapon was so powerful that it even swung around the Trinity Style itself. Without the constant slight adjustments by a genius like Skuld Silent-Third, the 200,000 ton mass could easily have flipped right over.

She was not swinging the blade however she liked. She was making it look that way by skillfully redirecting that power which was great enough to swing around the entire Object.

It was just like that serial killer's lifestyle.

She planned nothing, she adlibbed everything, and she killed as many people as she could at the moment. …In her pursuit of that, she set aside the concept of risk and produced enough results that it all "looked like" military actions.

But…

"She's using an air cushion this time."

"?"

"We have a ballista that was meant to add air resistance to interfere with her movements. The arrowheads were filled with aluminum and iron oxide powder for the chemical fusion needed to attach them."

"What about it?"

"This isn't a lake. It's a giant river full of muddy water. That means it has a definite current. And the Trinity Style specializes in acoustic scanning. It probably can't tell what's flowing through the water. Or it has difficulty doing so."

"Yeah, and what about it!?"

"There might still be something we can do…" said Quenser on the

boat. “Let’s take a look at the things floating in the river. It can be drums or plastic tanks, but we need empty containers above a certain size!!”

Part 7

Eric Kingsvalley climbed onto the roof of an armored truck rocking in the current and continued with his mission. He threw coiled barbed wire into the river from upstream of the Baby Magnum. The plan was simple: wait for the barbed wire to catch on the Object's naval float.

They were not actively attacking and they were not sure how effective this would even be, but the possibility of a trap in the river would restrict the enemy Pilot Elite's movements. It was like asking someone to cheerfully walk across a minefield.

They of course made sure to mark the barbed wire's location with an ultrasonic emitter. That allowed their side to remain cheerful. Even if the enemy picked up on the signal, they would still restrict themselves. Were there marked traps and unmarked traps? Were they playing into the enemy's hand by relying on those markers? Even if they focused on those uncertain markers, it would still have an effect.

The Faith Organization's plan was going well.

In fact, it looked like Saint Skuld was hunting down the Legitimacy Kingdom First Generation with or without their help.

That should have been a joyous scene.

They should have been watching the defeat of their hated enemy.

But a cloud hung over Eric's face.

(What are we doing?)

Wars were given a justification, but good was not rewarded and evil was not punished. He had learned that all too well while taking part in this clean war. If he peeled away the thin layer of flowery words about their heroic actions, he was sure to find the sordid profit and scheming behind the scenes. He understood that and he knew that

was none of his concern. Just as the military had its battlefields, the politicians had their own battlefields.

But something seemed wrong with what Saint Skuld was doing here. Eric did not care if someone was popping open some champagne in a secret villa to celebrate a successful conspiracy. If that ultimately benefited the people of the safe countries, then it was for the best. Eric was not a fish who swam through pure white bleach. If it would bring everyone happiness, he was fine with mixing in some “lubricant”. As long as it was a small “thank you” that did not put any pressure on the national treasury.

But who would see happiness from Saint Skuld’s actions here?

Who other than Skuld herself would be saved by this?

This entire battle was the same. They were killing the Legitimacy Kingdom’s First Generation in order to continue using the Saint Skuld in battle. That would prove that Skuld could be controlled by the Faith Organization while also having her destroy the original cause of this entire mess.

This battle had begun with Skuld’s selfishness and was meant to rid her of a personal crime.

This would only benefit a single individual.

That was nothing but a nuisance to the Legitimacy Kingdom and the taxpayers funding all of this. Not to mention the soldiers who had fallen victim to Skuld’s brutal “hobby”.

Was this really the right thing to do?

Wasn’t there something else he should be doing?

“…”

Eric clenched his teeth.

He felt ashamed that his hands kept working even as those thoughts filled his mind. Was he trying to escape those unpleasant thoughts by losing himself in his work, or had he just been that thoroughly

trained by the Faith Organization and the Saints? Not even he knew.

At any rate, he finished throwing a set of barbed wire coils into the river and then used the headset in his ear to contact the fellow soldier in the armored truck.

“This is Eric. I’ve finished dumping them. Begin the ultrasonic signal test. We’d look like idiots if the barbed wire we dumped got caught on our own propeller.”

He had assumed he would receive the standard sort of response with a crude joke mixed in, but he did not.

“Wait, what the hell!? Hey, what’s going on!? Hey!!”

“What is it, Neil? If you think something’s malfunctioned, tell me. I’m on the roof, so I can pop open the engine grille and check the-…”

“We’re getting a distress signal from Saints Urd and Verdandi! But why!? Why would the ejection process be running when they’re winning!?”

An unpleasant sensation stroked along Eric’s back.

The situation was unnatural enough on its own, but one fact was more concerning than the rest: Urd and Verdandi. But what about the third sister?

If those two really were being ejected by some sort of malfunction, who would have absolute control of the powerful Norn?

“It can’t be…”

For whom was this battle being fought?

That question rose to the surface once more, and in the worst possible way.

“It can’t be!!”

Part 8

Urd slammed her hands against the cramped cockpit's console, but that was not going to trigger a malfunction in the 50m machine. They had left the primary control with Skuld, but that did not explain this.

The controls were not responding at all.

No one had pressed the button and the Object should have been in perfect working order, but the emergency ejection countdown was the only thing on the screen. She tried a variety of methods and processes for stopping it, but none of it worked.

"Verdandi, how are things on your end?"

"Since you're asking that, I take it you're faced with an inexplicable ejection too!!"

There was bitterness in her voice.

There was only one possibility Urd could think of.

The Legitimacy Kingdom had infiltrated their maintenance base to rescue the student named Quenser Barbotage.

To temporarily stop the Norn, they had installed virus in a Dvergr work robot they had previously captured and then slipped that into the Norn to infect the entire system.

The Faith Organization had thought they had fully eliminated that virus.

But it was possible a second virus had entered the Norn along with the first one.

And just as she considered that…

"Hee…hee."

Her thoughts were cut off by laughter so full of young brutality that it rubbed her nerves the wrong way.

“Hee hee hee hee hee hee!! Ha ha, ah ha ha ha ha!! Hee hee. Ee hee ha ha ha ha!! Ah hah hah hah hah hah hah!!”

That reminded Urd that Skuld Silent-Third had temporarily been in Legitimacy Kingdom custody. She had leaked information on the Faith Organization base zone and joined in the operation to rescue Quenser (so that she could finish him off herself).

Who had slipped the Dvergr work robot into the Norn?

What if…?

“Sku…ld?”

“Were you planning this from the beginning!?” asked Verdandi.

“Planning? Planning what? Do you really think this was a single straight path!? All I do is kill as many people as I can in the moment. I look at the situation in front of me and make the choice that will cause the most death. But I certainly never expected to have a chance to take the whole Norn for myself!”

It was all adlibbed.

There was no plan.

When an opportunity rolled out in front of her, she kept it rolling in the worst possible way. Since that alone had led to stealing an Object, she may have been a true genius.

“How insane are you!?”

“Let’s just say ‘completely’. Now, now. No one can stop me and no one can stop the Norn!! Ah ha ha! Death seen through a screen is flavorless because it feels like a video game, but it might not be bad to go all out here and escape with this. With this thing’s air cushion, I can cross both sea and land, so I have any number of escape routes. It won’t be long before I find my way to a safe country!!”

Oh, no, thought Urd as her throat grew dry.

Skuld could not be left to her own devices. If that lunatic blended into a safe country, the damage would spread without end. That was why the three of them shared control. (In practice, the two older sisters restrained Skuld.) If that system crumbled away and Skuld alone held the Norn, it would lead to a true catastrophe. The button to begin Ragnarok would be in the bloody hands of a serial killer.

“Skul-…!!”

“Farewell, my sisters. I will always remember what a perfect *mis*understanding you had of me. But don’t worry about what happens after you eject. My anti-air lasers can shoot you a hundred times over while you float down with your parachutes.”

Urd knew that, but there was nothing more she could do.

The countdown reached zero. All of the barriers opened and the chairs holding the two sisters raced up the rails and were ejected from the Norn.

Part 9

Two hidden hatches opened on the top of the Trinity Style.

Something shot out of them.

They were Pilot Elite girls in green special suits. They were thrown out into the pouring rain of the sky during the intense battle and their parachutes automatically opened. The parachutes caught the air and pinned the girls in place.

The surrounding air had essentially been fried by the extraordinarily powerful blade made from plasma that ruled over everything within 5 km.

As if that were not enough, a single secondary cannon moved slightly on both the top and bottom of the spherical main body. Those anti-air lasers could shoot down supersonic missiles without breaking a sweat and now they targeted Urd and Verdandi. Crazed laughter sounded from the warning speakers.

“Ah ha ha ha ha!! Ee hee ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha!! Welcome to freedom, welcome to equality, and welcome to a world where you can feel a life in your hands!! Nothing needs to be planned and it

can all be adlibbed, but I will always make the choice that leads to the most death!! Now, show me how brightly you shine!!"

Heivia felt a chill run down his back as he rode the rubber boat through the river.

"What do we do? Really, what the hell do we do!? This isn't even a war anymore; it's some utter moron putting on a murder show with a strategic weapon. The White Flag is meaningless and the war treaties aren't going to help!! When did the world go completely insane, goddammit!?"

"We're working to do something about that, aren't we!?" shouted back Quenser.

They had a few wet drums and plastic tanks on the boat. They had gathered what looked usable from the trash flowing down the river.

"I'm not letting Skuld get away with this. If she can enjoy her blindfolded tightrope walk and laugh at the fact that she could fall at any moment, then I'll shove her off. Her adlibbed life ends here!!"

"But how exactly are you going to do that!? The Princess is barely hanging on, her Object is melting, and the Trinity Style's conscience was ejected and is about to get lasered!!"

"That's why *we* have to do it!! There are literally millions of lives on the line here, so prepare yourself, Heivia!!"

As he yelled at his friend, Quenser pressed the sole of his boot against the drum he had carried over to the edge of the boat. He then kicked it out into the river.

Someone had said this was not a war anymore.

Then what was it?

Someone thought it would be best not to name it.

This cruel concept needed to be sent back to the darkness from whence it came before it spread to the world at large.

Chapter 8

Part 1

Let us review the situation.

Due to a virus injected during the operation to rescue Quenser, the Trinity Style's emergency ejection system malfunctioned. Urd and Verdandi were ejected from the Object, leaving Skuld in complete control.

The Object used a single main cannon on the side. A powerful laser beam fully vaporized a container shell to create plasma, which formed a blade 5km long.

The ground flooded due to the heavy rain, forcing any Objects to use air cushions.

The river was only about waist deep, but the current was too swift for anyone to stand and drowning was entirely possible. The water was too muddy to see inside and even acoustic sensors had difficulty.

Quenser and Heivia's boat was upstream of the Trinity Style.

They were retrieving empty drums and plastic containers drifting down the river.

Why?

Their boat was equipped with a ballista, a crossbow several meters long. It fired arrows thicker than a metal rod with aluminum and iron oxide powder in the tip to induce chemical welding. When those hit the Object's armor, they would instantly heat up to nearly 3000 degrees, welding them on.

Quenser and Heivia were removing the contents and filling the drums and plastic containers with them.

To detonate them, Quenser included some Hand Axe plastic explosive with an electric fuse attached.

Then they kicked them into the river from upstream.

The current swept them toward the Trinity Style.

Of course, detonating them below an Object which could survive a nuke would not blow the Trinity Style to smithereens.

They were aiming for something else.

As soon as Quenser pressed the switch on his radio, a blinding light surged out of the river directly below the Object.

At the same time, a lot of water vapor erupted from the river.

The Trinity Style would be using an air cushion so it could travel on both water and land. Needless to say, that system worked by blasting a bunch of compressed air straight down to create a layer of air between the ground and the Object.

What if that thoroughly calculated and equalized air current were disturbed?

What if it were made uneven so the weight was focused on a single point?

The answer was simple.

The Trinity Style had been moving so smoothly, but now it stopped and it sank into the river. It was only a difference of about a meter, but that was enough for the 200,000 ton mass to sink into the water. The layer of air vanished, the gap was filled, and the advantage of the air cushion vanished. It was just like pressing two wet palms together. Its movement was sealed.

On the boat, Quenser brought his radio to his mouth.

And he shouted to the Princess with all his might.

“She’ll recover in less than 10 seconds!! But she’s stopped! Blow her awayyyy

Quenser had no idea what Skuld was thinking as she piloted the Trinity Style in that moment, but the plasma blade main cannon was still aimed toward the Baby Magnum and the spherical main body's many secondary cannons were still aimed at her older sisters as they floated down in their parachutes.

She would kill as many people as she could kill when and where she could kill them.

That stance must not have changed to the very, very end.

The low-stability plasma cannon fired by the half-melted Baby Magnum pierced straight through the murderer's weapon.

This time, there was nothing Skuld could do.

The countless Dvergr work robots could rearrange themselves, but that was meaningless when the central JPlevelMHD reactor had been destroyed. The nuke-resistant armor swelled out from within and then burst.

The light was blinding and the noise deafening.

Urd and Verdandi's calm flight was interrupted by the shockwave slamming them into the river and Quenser and Heivia's rubber boat was flipped entirely over.

The two idiots grabbed onto the capsized boat for buoyancy because the powerful current pulled at their legs and threatened to drag them away.

"Ugh, cough!!"

"Dammit… Is it…over for the time being…?"

They were exhausted.

They could not just let the current carry them away. They had to return to the maintenance base zone somehow. They knew that, but they did not have the energy.

"Man, we moved a long way. We're right on the edge of the combat

zone. It might be easier to have the village in the forest pick us up. Waiting for the rescue chopper in a bed might not be so bad, even if it's a cheap one."

Quenser just about responded to Heivia with an exhausted laugh… but then he tensed up.

"Right on the edge of the combat zone? The village in the forest? Hey, Heivia, are you saying there's a civilian residential area near here!?"

"Y-yeah. What about it…?"

"…"

Skuld was supposed to be extremely myopic and only chose the option that let her kill he most people in her current situation.

What if?

What if she had known about that village and had surreptitiously shifted her battle with the Baby Magnum toward the edge of the combat zone?

And what if her utter disregard for normal benefits had led her to focus on the village from the beginning?

"Verdandi to anyone who is listening, Verdandi to anyone who is listening. This is on an open channel, so the Legitimacy Kingdom soldiers need to listen up too!!"

The voice of an enemy nation cut in over the radio.

"I received Skuld's emergency ejection signal just before the explosion. She escaped. This isn't over yet!!"

"Impossible…" Quenser ignored all military regulations and grabbed his radio. "Impossible!! If she was floating around in her parachute, someone would have noticed!!"

"That's why she didn't use her parachute. She ignored the 50m drop and launched herself right into the flooded river. She'll try anything

if it means spilling the blood of even one more person!!”

“…”

It was obvious where she was headed.

“This is bad. If Skuld has a handmade snorkel, she can let the muddy water carry her right to the village. She’ll slip past all of us!!”

Frolaytia must have been aware of the situation because her voice arrived over the radio next.

“Experimental Battlefield Madagascar is a treasure trove of rare animals, so it has a lot of smugglers. There will be ships on the coast and even charter planes and helicopters that can leave under a falsified flight plan. If she changes clothes at the village and secures the funds needed to negotiate with some smugglers, she has good odds of escaping. And then that serial killer will arrive at a safe country. We must prevent any civilian sacrifices above all else!”

“What should I do?” asked the Princess.

“There’s nothing you can do in a dense village. But the simple presence of your anti-air equipment will restrict Skuld’s options. At the very least, she won’t be able to leave straight away even if there’s a helicopter in the village. You keep her in check like that!”

“Hey, Quenser, what should we do?” asked Heivia.

“What else?”

Quenser let go of the capsized rubber boat.

He let the current carry him away to follow the same route Skuld would have taken.

“It’s time to settle things with that twintail piece of shit once and for all!!”

Part 2

It had originally been a small wooden village built in the gaps between the trees of the thick jungle. It would have maybe had 100 residents. But due to the flooding at certain times of year, all of the buildings were built high off the ground and they were connected by wooden bridges.

The land was entirely flooded. It was strange seeing tree trunks sticking straight out of the water. The animals were quite noisy, but that may have been because the squirrels and monkeys were fighting over the branches now that the land was not an option.

"…"

Skuld's slender hands clung to one of the legs supporting a wooden bridge between two small buildings.

The serial killer had finally arrived at her hunting ground.

A young man had come out into the pouring rain because he was worried the gusts of wind were affecting the satellite antenna. When he noticed the (seemingly) drowning twintail girl, he quickly ran over.

"H-hey, are you okay!? Are you crazy!? I don't know what happened, but why would you go outside today!?"

She clung to the strong arm he reached out to her and he dragged her up onto the bridge.

Meanwhile, everything's outlines blurred psychedelically in Skuld's vision. She could sense a human's body heat, breathing, pulse, and creaking joints and cartilage from so close. She could torment, lick, toy with, and finally break him. That was all it would take for her to experience his invisible and inaudible life.

It was like a tightly closed bivalve.

Its breaking was not a sad thing.

Nothing was more wasteful than refusing to pry open the shell and letting the contents rot away.

“Those clothes… Are you a soldier?”

“No, um, I’m more like an important mascot made to look like one…”

Not even Skuld knew why she had lied. But it did not really matter if this young man realized she was lying. If that happened, she would just have to enjoy her meal without any preparation.

And when she took a closer look, she realized this young man was a little too muscular for her liking. He lost some points for the beard as well. That slightly reduced the psychedelic coloring of her vision. She was calming down.

Yes, she was starving, but that was no reason to gorge herself on bad food.

Anything would taste great to her now, but that was exactly why she had to start with the most exquisite dish.

After running and running to exhaustion, no one would want to drink a cup of lukewarm water smelling of chlorine. There were so many better options: ice-cold champagne, 100% orange juice, mineral water that made a brand name out of water, etc.

“I would like to contact my tour company, so do you have a phone I can use?”

“Oh, yes, don’t worry. We have a satellite line. This way. You must be chilled, so you’d probably love a heater and some warm soup, right?”

The young man really did seem to be worried about Skuld. He did not seem to be luring the young girl back home as an unexpected treat. Then again, this had been so unexpected that those wicked thoughts might start growing once he calmed down.

It did not matter either way to Skuld.

He was not her preference, but she could always find a greater feast after enjoying a nice little snack.

And a hunt was best when it was somewhat thrilling.

It was a desire for that sort of spice that had led her to start choosing her prey from the soldiers in her unit instead of the civilians she had previously targeted. A target that did not put up a fight and simply begged for its life was fine every once in a while, but it got old fast. Someone who would fight back however they could was much more enjoyable.

She was taken to a small house.

But this one doubled as a shop.

“I run a leisure shop. It’s mostly for hunting, though,” said the young man. “It might seem wrong in this treasure trove of rare animals, but if we don’t establish some rules and set some limits, the tourists will kill everything in no time. By telling them what animals they can hunt, how many they can kill, and what tools they can use, we can control things enough to keep the animals from going extinct.”

“Oh?”

She had thought they would have nothing in common, but he had a decent sense of aesthetics. Skuld somewhat understood the way he thought about controlling lives. Although her prey was far from endangered. The planet was teeming with that species of primate.

“What about this life jacket and fishing pole? I don’t see how you could use those in the forest.”

“What do you think it was that swept you here? The jungle tends to flood during the rainy season, so I’ve expanded to cover marine sports as well. I also have diving equipment and spearguns.”

“…”

Skuld looked interested and traced her fingers across the speargun set up next to the counter.

It was a strangely shaped gun. It looked like a small plastic handgun had been stretched out to 70cm. And instead of lead bullets, it contained a metal spear longer than an umbrella. The end had a sinister barb just like a fishing hook.

“Big Game Hunter?”

Skuld curiously read aloud the words printed on it.

“That’s its name,” said the young man. “That’s one I customized myself, so it isn’t for sale.”

“?”

“Spearguns for fishing normally use gas or rubber to launch the shaft, but that one uses a blank rifle cartridge. Then again, that blank cartridge is also custom made. It’s packed full of gunpowder, so your gun will explode if you use it in a normal hunting rifle.” The shop manager shrugged. “It’s for emergencies only, like when a crocodile approaches the flooded village. It has a range of 20m in the water and 100 in the air. With a range like that, the risk of accidentally hitting someone is too great for use in marine sports.”

Four meters was normally enough for a speargun, so it was obvious how extraordinary the Big Game Hunter was.

“Everyone always says it’s too dangerous, but this is the only thing that does the trick when it really counts. You need something to protect your family, you know?”

“Your family…”

Skuld slowly narrowed her eyes, but the young man failed to notice the slight change.

“Then…do you have a wife and child?”

“Yeah, they’re in the back. My son is normally getting himself into trouble, but he always curls up and trembles in a corner of the room when a storm blows in. But that’s part of what makes him so adorable. Want to see a picture?”

The young man pulled out his wallet.

The spot for a subway pass had a photo of a smiling family of three, including the young man.

“Oh?”

Skuld’s eyes were drawn to one of them in particular.

The child was even younger than Skuld and his frame had yet to fill out.

He appeared androgynous, but he was likely the son the young man had mentioned.

He lacked the muscles of a man, but his bodylines were too pointed to be a girl.

Skuld’s eyes glanced elsewhere. The Big Game Hunter speargun was casually placed next to the counter, putting it well within arm’s reach.

And this wonderful life was in the residential area behind the shop. That bivalve was waiting to be pried open by Skuld’s hands. If someone stabbed a blade into it and used the principle of leverage to split it apart from the outside, the shellfish could not survive. But people were most attracted to the soft flesh within, and that only showed itself once the shell was opened.

In other words…

There was an attractive prey here.

There was an attractive weapon here.

She gulped. She felt like sweet poison was flowing through her veins as her heart pounded. Her nerves forgot all heat and pain as they specialized themselves to feel only pleasure. She could tell her entire body – from the most vital organs to the tiniest hair – was being alluringly remade. Skuld Silent-Third naturally repeated herself while a strange sensation spiraled through her mind.

The defenseless shop manager had his back turned as he messed with the phone on the counter.

And she said the same thing once more.

“Oh?”

Part 3

The river should have carried them to jungle village Skuld had gone to, but the current was not the same everywhere. Bumps in the ground, trees in the way, and small piles of garbage tangled with cloth caused the current to split apart in places.

The soldiers who had been together entering the forest were separated at some point.

The first one to arrive at the village was Quenser.

He climbed onto one of the wooden bridges between houses.

“This is Quenser. I’ve arrived at the village. We can’t afford to wait, so I’m going in now. I just hope Skuld was swept along a different branch of the river and taken right into a crocodile’s den.”

“Understood. But don’t pursue her if you don’t have to. The Object battle is over and the other excess mouths to feed are on their way there. You just have to make sure no civilians are killed. Find a way to stall her until reinforcements arrive.”

“I never thought we’d be working together with the Faith Organization.”

“This is just like in Oceania. No one wants to work with them any longer than we have to. And I can’t believe they’re acting like our territory doesn’t matter now that the battle is over. They’re pretending to be angelic volunteers after everything they did, so I’m going to fine them for all they’re worth once this is over!”

Quenser listened to Frolaytia on the radio as he stabbed an electric fuse into the Hand Axe he had molded in his hand. He attached the clay-like bombs to the wooden bridges, house walls, and tree trunks sticking up from the flooded river.

(Alpha, beta, charlie, delta…)

He did not have a real plan. He had no idea what would come in

handy, so he was attaching it everywhere he could.

With the rain pouring and blowing, no one must have wanted to go outside. As far as he could see, the village was entirely silent. That made sense, but an unpleasant feeling rose in his chest. He was worried Skuld had already gone nuts here and opening any door would reveal a colorful world that stank of rust.

Was Skuld here?

And if so, where would she start her attack?

A normal serial killer could be profiled based on the conditions in which they acted, but that did not work with Skuld. She loved adlibbing everything. She would find herself in an unexpected situation and then choose whatever option would lead to the most death. Simply put, her decision making was passive, so a lot of it depended on fate's dice roll.

So…

"Someone took her in."

It would start with an adlib that Skuld could not have predicted.

While spreading the Hand Axe around and investigating the wooden bridges that linked everything together like a spider web, he found something odd. Footprints would vanish almost immediately in the pouring rain, but some traces would remain.

He saw a long hair with a familiar shade of blonde caught between two boards on one bridge.

Assuming Skuld had climbed out here, he looked around. Most of the small house's doors and windows were boarded up for the storm, but one place had left its front door defenselessly exposed.

"…"

Quenser exhaled and slowly approached.

The building was structured somewhat differently from the others.

It was still only one story, but it looked like two of the others houses linked together. And the one out front had a sign on it. The name there suggested it was a shop for leisure items.

Quenser set up some bombs out of habit and then walked toward that front entrance.

The door was made of wood, so he could peek inside.

Should he press his ear to it, should he surreptitiously turn the knob, should he pound on the door to warn the civilians inside, or should he attach some Hand Axe and blow it up?

He was unsure what to do.

And then he heard the creaking of a floor panel.

After a momentary delay, the door was blown to smithereens from the inside.

Part 4

The handmade speargun named Big Game Hunter had a range of 20m in the water and 100m in the air. That might sound weak compared to a normal assault rifle, but there was a trap there.

The destructive power of a bullet was determined by more than just the amount of explosive used.

In addition to the explosive used to fire it, the weight of the bullet was crucial.

It was like the difference between the same person hitting you with a wooden stick or a metal rod.

The bullet portion of a rifle round was only a few centimeters long, but a speargun shaft could be between 50 and 60 centimeters. That drastically changed the weight.

Not to mention when it was fired with a custom blank packed with so much gunpowder that a normal rifle would burst from within.

That meant it was unstable and did not fly far, but it had incredible instantaneous power.

The shot was as destructive as an anti-materiel rifle as it broke through the door and pierced the wall.

"…!!!???"

Quenser was not even able to clench his teeth.

As soon as the door was destroyed, he was blown backwards by the ferocious blast. If the shaft itself had hit him, his torso would have been torn apart. Since that had not happened, he must have been hit by the fragments of the wooden door instead.

Even so, it was not fun having several sharp splinters stabbing through his thick military uniform. He screamed and writhed atop the wet wooden bridge.

“Gaaaahhhhh!! Agggaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhhhhh!?”

“Hee hee.”

The girl’s laughter was far too poisonous to call lovely.

“Hee hee. Eh heh heh. Ah ha ha ha ha ha ha!!”

“Ah, gh, hah!!”

The twintail girl wore a green special suit.

She was a lunatic, a murderer, a serial killer.

She was Skuld Silent-Third.

When Quenser saw that monster step out of the building while loading some kind of arrow to her weapon, he bore with the pain and rolled to the side. He was lucky she could not fire in quick succession. Skuld loaded the shaft, pulled the cocking lever to expel the empty cartridge, and loaded something like a rifle bullet. She aimed the speargun downwards and the shaft fired with the power of gunpowder.

The wooden bridge broke.

Quenser nearly rolled into the surging river along with the pieces of the bridge, but he somehow managed to keep his balance.

(There’s a…bomb! Right at her feet. If I can detonate that…!!)

Meanwhile, Skuld finished reloading.

They glared at each other from opposite sides of the broken bridge.

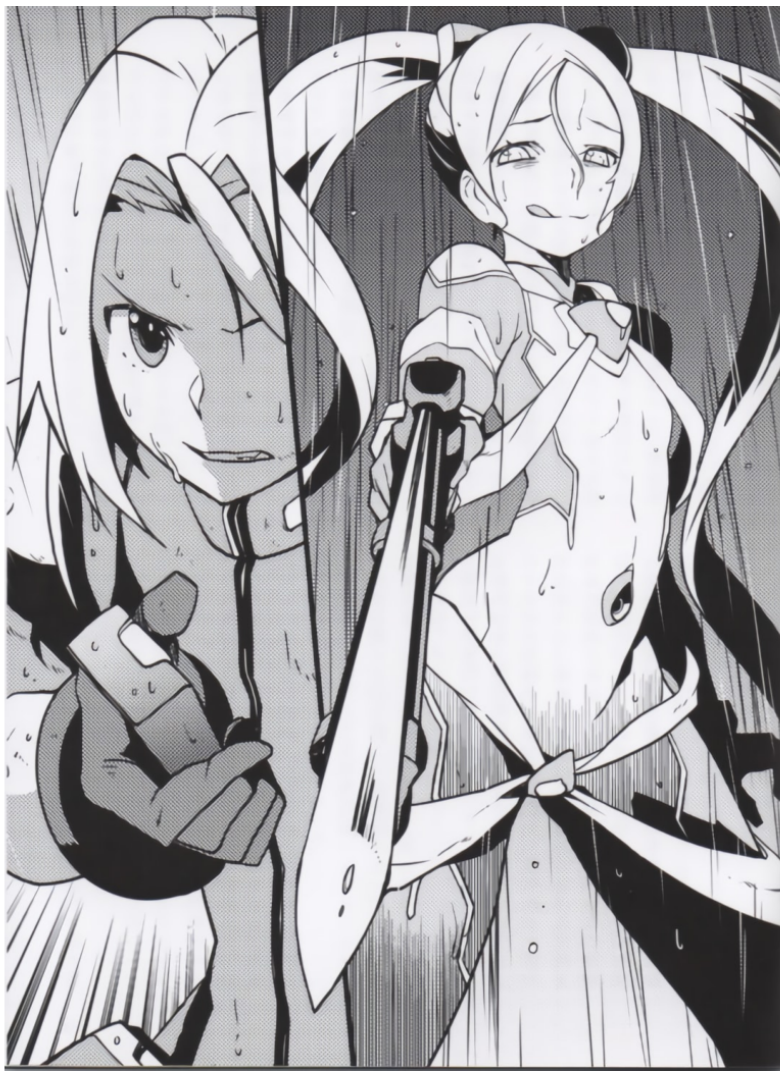
He held out the radio connected to the bomb and she held out the brutal speargun.

“This is over, Skuld!! There’s a bomb below the bridge. Resist any further and I won’t hold back!! I’ll detonate it!!”

“Resist? Me!? Are you confused about which one of us is the hunter and which is the hunted!?”

“Skuld!!”

“And I haven’t had a single bite of my feast yet.”



Skuld aimed her speargun away from Quenser’s chest, seemingly throwing away her card in this standoff.

No, that was not it.

Something rolled out from the broken door to the leisure shop she

had left. She was aiming toward that. Anyone could tell it was a hostage with his hands tied behind his back.

“Gah, kh, ghh…you!?”

“Hee hee. Don’t move, okay?”

Skuld’s eyes narrowed seductively, the heat of ecstasy remained in her cheeks even in the pouring rain, and she let out a sultry breath.

She would occasionally glance back toward the house and lick her lips.

“I would love to have the greatest feast first. I can’t stand lukewarm water after running and running. So if you don’t move, I’ll overlook you. Until I’ve had a much, much more delicious feast.”

The lunatic’s words were not enough to understand the whole picture.

But in this short time, Quenser had grasped a few facts.

(There haven’t been any victims in the village yet.)

He glared at Skuld so intensely the air seemed to strain.

(And the target she most wants is back inside that leisure shop. I won’t let her kill anyone here. If she gets in there, there’s no stopping this tragedy!!)

“And you.” Skuld spoke to Quenser while still aiming her speargun at the shop manager. “Listen. There’s still a chance everyone will survive this. But if you try anything here…if you move so much as a finger, you’ll lose that chance. At the very least, that man will have this thing driven straight through his chest. Oh, dear. You would be causing an international incident, wouldn’t you? And soldiers aren’t supposed to slaughter civilians, are they?”

“How can you so blatantly ignore your own role in this!?”

“But I’m right. So what will you do? Will you obey my instructions or will you recklessly rely on your bomb? It’s your choice.”

“…”

The leisure shop manager’s mind finally seemed to be recovering.

His arms were bound in the pouring rain and tears welled up in his eyes.

With that strange half-tearful look, he called out to Quenser rather than Skuld.

“Do it.”

He was not begging for his life.

His legs were trembling, but he still stood up and spoke for himself.

“Don’t worry about me. My family is in there! My wife and my son who only just turned seven!! So do it. I don’t care if I’m skewered, but I can’t let her in there with that weapon!! That space is only meant for my family!! So please!!”

“You heard him. So…what – will – you – do?”

Quenser clenched his teeth so hard he thought the back teeth would break.

Should he obey Skuld by throwing away the radio and try to negotiate, or should he accept that one sacrifice and trigger the explosion? Both options held possibility and risk. If he obediently threw away the radio, he and the shop manager might be shot to death. If he triggered the explosion, the odds were good the shop manager would die. He wanted more than anything to not have to make this decision.

But time was not going to wait.

Doing nothing was not an option. He had to choose one or the other.

Finally, he breathed a heavy sigh and raised both hands.

“Okay, fine. I’ll throw away the radio.”

“…!! Why!? Kill her! I’m telling you to do it!! Is it because I’m here!? Could you do something without me here!? Then I’ll just have her kill me right-…”

“Okay, stop. Make too much noise and I really will do it.”

She jerked the speargun toward him and his puny courage shattered.

His face twisted as tears and snot covered it.

“Stop. I said I’ll do what you want.”

“Oh, but maybe I should just do it anyway.”

“Stop!! I’ll throw it away right now!!”

Quenser spat out the words and chucked the radio in a long parabolic arc. Water splashed up from the river in the distance.

He kept his hands raised and glared at Skuld.

He was soaked with an unpleasant sweat very different from the pouring rain.

Skuld laughed.

“Oh? Are you sure you should have trusted a serial killer?”

“Yes. I know you won’t kill that shop manager.”

“What makes you say that?”

“You have another target to kill first: me.”

The twintail girl gave him a baffled look.

And then she burst out laughing.

“Ah ha ha ha ha ha ha ha!!”

“When I was captured by the Faith Organization, you came to save me despite the risk. Returning to your old base might have gotten

you captured too, but you did it anyway! That wasn't out of a sense of camaraderie. You couldn't stand having your sisters take me away from you and torture me to death. I don't know where I rank in your twisted mind, but I have to be higher than that man there!!"

"Yes! That's exactly right!!"

Skuld's back trembled as she suppressed more laughter.

The tip of the speargun shook irregularly as it aimed toward the civilian.

"I found you first! I had dibs! But they were so mean. They showed up late, pretended they had justice on their side, and stole my prey right before my eyes!! That's why I ruined everything for them! Ah ha ha ha ha!!"

"…"

"But."

Skuld's smile vanished.

All emotion vanished from her eyes, like she was a strange insect.

"That doesn't mean it applies here. After all, I simply choose the option that causes the most death in the moment. This situation is different from back then. And that changes my priorities. You can't predict my actions. I mean, not even I can do that!!"

"Why are you so intent on killing?"

Quenser breathed heavily with his hands in the air.

Skuld still did not smile.

"People's lives cannot be seen or heard. They are like water or air. We don't understand their importance while we have more than enough."

Her bangs were plastered to her forehead by the rain.

“So I want to know what a life feels like. Just like a drowning person driven to the edge and desperately seeking air, I want to know exactly what a life feels like. I mean, aren’t human lives noble things? They aren’t something you can take away just by staring at a screen and pressing a button, right?”

Had Skuld always thought this way?

Or had it been caused by the unrealistic exchange of lives she had seen in the cockpit as a young Pilot Elite.

Quenser thought about a great many things over a short period of time, but then he spat out his answer.

“Then kill yourself.”

“What do you think I’m doing? Ah ha ha!! What greater method of suicide is there!?”

She laughed confidently.

But Skuld’s speargun moved from the leisure shop owner and aimed at Quenser instead. The boy was unsure what exactly had tugged at her heartstrings or triggered her wrath, but that did not matter. He was sick of playing along with a lunatic’s logic.

He smiled thinly with his hands raised.

“Oh, so either way was fine with you.”

“That’s right. Either way is fine. I just wanted to know what a life feels like. I wanted to be driven to the edge for that. That could mean taking someone else’s life or it could mean exposing my own life. The most boring and insufferable thing is being raised inside a safe birdcage. Yes, inside that nuke-resistant Norn!!”

“Then I have no reason to hold back.”

“?”

“Hey, Skuld. Modern radios are pretty convenient. They don’t break just because you drop them in some water.”

“What are you-…?”

“And if you combine a piece of wood the size of a chopstick with a rubber band, a river’s current can remove the stopper while the rubber band presses the button.”

“…”

Skuld froze in place.

“…It can’t be!”

“Lastly, I threw the radio upstream. As the river sweeps it *back this way*, it’s sending out the detonation signal. Now, what do you think will happen to the bomb at your feet once it enters the effective range!?”

Skuld did not hesitate.

She mercilessly pulled the trigger of the speargun aimed at Quenser.

At close range, the shaft had destructive power on par with an anti-materiel rifle.

But it was too late.

With an explosive noise, Skuld’s small body was launched several meters straight up.

The Hand Axe on the bridge below her feet had detonated.

The explosive blast must have thrown off her aim because the shaft did not even come close to hitting Quenser.

He slowly breathed out and waved at the leisure shop manager. The young man had fallen onto his butt with his hands tied behind his back, and he finally ran back into the house.

Skuld was caught on the roof of one of the single-story houses. The blast seemed to have smashed both her legs, but it had not been enough to sever them. The speargun was nowhere to be seen, but she had likely lost her grip and dropped it into the river.

Military boots belatedly pounded on the wooden bridges. Legitimacy Kingdom and Faith Organization soldiers climbed from the river and rushed in. They all aimed their guns toward Quenser and Skuld.

“Freeze! Put your hands on your head!!”

“We found both Quenser and Skuld. Damn, she’s passed out. If she had resisted, we could have shot her!!”

“This is technically a battlefield country, but we’re in a civilian village. Act with caution. I repeat…!!”

The deafening sound of wind passed by overhead.

A military helicopter from one side or the other must have arrived.

Quenser leaned against a wet wall and spoke to his awful friend Heivia.

“When can I put my hands down?”

“After we’ve retrieved all of the bombs you set up all over the place. Dammit Quenser, did you *have* to give us all this extra work!?”

Part 5

Skuld Silent-Third awoke on a shaking stretcher.

Her legs were filled with an intense pain that felt like the dentist scraping at her teeth but increased several times over. She worked her hazy mind, searched through her memories, and finally realized her legs must have been destroyed by the blast of the explosion.

She felt no fear or hatred.

She wanted to feel human death, so she joyfully accepted the pain. That was as true of pain given to others as it was of pain given to her.

She was not outside.

She seemed to be onboard a transport helicopter.

Urd and Verdandi were looking down at her.

“Hey, she’s woken up.”

“So it seems.”

Those two sisters holed up in their nuke-resistant armor and drowned in a sea of the powerful anesthetic known as “safety”. They used the simple idea of justice to burn away target after target on their screens, so those poor empty shells had lost sight of the meaning and value of a life. Skuld only felt pity for them. She knew she was insane, but her two older sisters did not know the same about themselves. They were the “proper” monsters who everyone praised. In that case, who was truly worthy of contempt?

“It doesn’t matter,” carelessly concluded Skuld.

What she had done and what she would do had not changed. She would continue to make the choice that would bring about the most deaths in the moment. It did not matter if her own name was on the list of the dead. What awaited her if she was court martialed and

thrown in prison? She might be tormented and killed inside prison or someone might find her useful enough to release her. But that did not matter.

Whatever the situation she found herself in, she would pour all of her efforts into choosing the option that led to the most death.

“That isn’t happening, Saint Skuld.”

A young man spoke as if he had read her mind.

Instead of a Pilot Elite, a normal soldier peered down at her. It was Eric Kingsvalley. He had acted as her assistant while they were POWs.

“Our Norn was destroyed. An Elite’s value is linked to the Object, so you will temporarily lose the many military protections you had. ..In other words, the entire system protecting you is no longer functioning.”

A normal Elite might have gone mad.

Their entire life had been denied and they had been dragged down from the throne of genius to wallow in the mud of mediocrity. They seriously might have bitten through their tongue at that announcement. There was even a slight but definite movement in the cheeks and eyebrows of Urd and Verdandi as they listened.

But Skuld remained carefree.

“What does that matter?”

She saw no meaning in being a Pilot Elite. Objects and the Norn were not absolute. She wanted to know the feeling of a life. She had only ended up here in search of that answer. So she was satisfied if she had that position, but its loss did not particularly matter. Just like before, she only had to continue down her own path.

She was truly a monster.

An incomprehensible genius.

“Are people with a grudge against me going to be coming for me? Then why not open the helicopter’s cargo door and shove my stretcher out? I don’t care if you do. After all, I can sense the breath of life there. I’m sure to see something when I die.”

“…No.”

Eric gave her a complicated look.

For some reason, there was some pity in it.

“Saint Skuld. …No, Skuld. You truly don’t understand your situation, do you?”

“?”

Just as she questioned that comment, she heard a metallic sound. She had tried to move her arm, but it would not budge. She looked down at her body and saw thick belts around her wrists and arms. No, that was not all. Her broken legs were excluded, but there were belts around her waist and neck to bind her entire body to the stretcher.

And a needle was sticking into the inside of her elbow.

Her eyes followed that up to an IV bag on a metal pole. What was inside that? It was clear, but the view through it was distorted like it was sugar water.

Urd breathed a heavy sigh.

“This might be the last time, so we were thinking about having a final farewell.”

“But it looks like that was a waste of time. She really was born this way. She wasn’t some poor victim of her environment, upbringing, or any other conditions.”

Was it poison?

Were they killing her?

That was not enough to scare Skuld at this point.

But that was not it.

“It’s an antimanic agent,” said Eric with a shake of his head. “The drug is used in psychiatry to artificially calm a state of mania. But if you are given it around the clock, you will be unable to think and you might as well be a doll that simply stares up at the ceiling.”

For the first time, a bad feeling entered Skuld’s chest.

“We knew you would be satisfied with both killing and being killed, so we won’t give you either. You can drift in a drug-induced haze forevermore. You can rot in the eternal peace you hated more than anything.”

“Wait…no… That’s…you can’t do that! Then how will I know what a life feels like!? Everyone always told me to treat life wih cyare…”

Even as she spoke, she rapidly lost her ability to enunciate.

She had to do something. She had to remove the belts and escape. She could feel that intense impatience, but her thoughts never reached the next step. The more she thought, the more scattered those thoughts became and her soul was trapped inside a prison of barely moving flesh.

She could no longer even tell one direction from another.

She simply heard Urd and Verdandi’s voices echoing through the ether.

“Don’t worry about anything. It seems the Faith Organization will use its tax money to pay for your care.”

“But as a living sample for a failed attempt at a mass-produced Elite. Doctors will occasionally be opening you up and poking around while you sleep, but you’ll just have to pray that none of them are perverts.”

Skuld desperately tried to hold her thoughts together.

Once she fell asleep, a century-long slumber would begin.

But that thin thread of consciousness was under attack.

It could snap at any moment.

“What a pain. So this ends the 5th Norn Program.”

“And I thought we’d finally stabilized everything after using our actual sister this time. We’ll have to find another new Skuld and some Object or another.”

(…Wait…what…?)

A mass-produced Object and a mass-produced Elite.

They were seeing which fit best with which as if she were nothing more than the ultimate artificial organ.

(There are other Objects being used…besides our Norn…?)

The Norns of North Mythology were the three goddesses of fate, but there were actually more than one group. Urd, Verdandi, and Skuld were the most well-known, but there were records of countless other Norns, some better known than others.

So if this too was following the myths…

(The three of us…aren’t the only…ones? There are other…trios… and Urd and Verdandi join the other groups…when the timing is right…? Oh, I see… The three sisters…can be freely rearranged…)

Skuld remembered something.

And that may have pushed it over the edge. She thought she heard a thin thread snapping in her mind.

“Find us a tougher Skuld for next time. The distortion always seems to concentrate there.”

“While we’re at it, how about I be Verdandi and you be Urd next time? I’m getting pretty sick of this role.”

“Honestly, I can’t believe any of this, Saints Urd and Verdandi. They’re going to make me sign something swearing to take this information with me to the grave, aren’t they? But anyway…”

…

…

…

“Goodbye, Skuld.”

“Goodbye, Skuld.”

“Goodbye, Skuld.”

Part 6

“Yes, yes.”

“Ha ha ha. That’s right. I couldn’t help but laugh when the cloning group tried to interfere. I breathed a sigh of relief that we had already adjusted it all so nothing happened. Really though, clones? Don’t make me laugh. Did they think our noble program was just a stepping stone for those scientists in lab coats?”

“Yes, the 5th Skuld seems to have caused some problems, but I think the Norn Program can continue without issue. We can continue with a 6th or 7th. I don’t know what part of the infinitely connected triangle will break next, but that won’t be a problem either. The broken triangle will combine like an amoeba to form a different triangle. That’s the entire point of mass-production and standardization.”

“Yes, exactly, Venerable Elder.”

“Our Objects are the symbol of our nation and we give them divine names from our religion.”

“Allowing us to swap out the Objects and Elites as we see fit will do more than just increase their performance as weapons. It also allows us to work with or reconcile with other religions despite the great barriers in the way. In fact, it could even open the way to creating a single unified organization.”

“Yes, that would become a true Faith Organization.”

“We will create a paradise that values the noble idea of crossing the

borders between religions to allow mutual respect between all those who know the wonders of worshiping a god. We would have a palace of eternal prosperity where no one could prevent us from receiving the infinite love generously poured down from heaven."

"Unfortunately, we are becoming a Faith Organization in name only. Ideas of exclusionism are spreading through both the monotheistic religions and even the polytheistic religions which are supposedly more open-minded, so we can no longer ignore the friction and tension inside our own world power. Without a definite external enemy like the Capitalist Corporations or the Information Alliance, we would fall apart almost immediately. But the Norn Program could breathe fresh air into that problem. We would have true unity without needing an external threat. Honestly, your brilliance is downright frightening, Venerable Elder."

"In that sense, the trouble caused by the 5th Skuld could provide some useful data. She was a symbol of the friction created by the interaction between religions. She had truly dark ideas and she was the barrier we need to break down. When a problem surfaces, we need to use it to our benefit. Analyzing and researching her psychology and brain structure would be quite valuable."

"Yes."

"I cannot even envision the completed form yet, but we are in the process of gathering each individual step we need to reach that point. Please take good care of yourself so that we can overcome another difficult spot, Venerable Elder."

"Yes, until we speak again."

"Let us pray that this sinful and impure world will reach a godly age void of strife."

Part 7

Quenser and the Legitimacy Kingdom military were busy preparing to withdraw.

They had defeated the Faith Organization's Second Generation Trinity Style and dealt with Skuld's escape, so they had no more reason to remain in Experimental Battlefield Madagascar. Quenser was helping the many maintenance soldiers pack up all the equipment and tools.

They had received new orders.

A new strategy was underway somewhere in the world and they were being thrown into some other war.

"She was completely insane."

Quenser breathed an exasperated sigh as he thought back on it all.

The Princess was sitting nearby with nothing to do, so she faced him with a blank look in her eyes.

"It wasn't for her job, for money, for fame, for her country, or for peace. She killed for the sake of killing because it was her hobby. It wasn't that she confused the means for the objective; killing was both her means and her objective, which is insane. And instead of being driven out, she was able to take root in her unit until she couldn't be extracted. Everything about it was completely broken. It was entirely unprecedented."

"Hmm."

The Princess's response was emotionless.

She looked slender and adorable at first glance, but she too had a monstrous side to her since she was singlehandedly responsible for the wars they fought in and she was the one that pulled the trigger.

Unlike Quenser and Heivia who crawled along the ground, the Pilot

Elites were protected by nuke-resistant armor and wielded main cannons with enough firepower to end the nuclear age, so what had Skuld looked like to her?

Was it simply, “Oh, is that all?”

Or had Skuld seemed abnormal even to her?

“Which do you think is more sinful?” she asked. “Killing people for a hobby or killing people for your job?”

“The perfect answer would be that all killing is equally sinful, but that would kind of defeat our entire purpose here.”

What did it mean to work with an Object?

What would it mean if he one day designed them?

“Skuld claimed she always chose the option that would kill the most people in that moment…”

“I think she was dependent on that idea,” said the Princess. “If you look at it another way, it’s an excuse saying she wouldn’t have killed if the conditions had been different. She seemed to be saying a lot of philosophical things, but I think that was the core of it all. She didn’t want to take responsibility for her own actions.”

“…”

The path of the Pilot Elite began at a very young age.

They became a symbol of war.

Had she sought a way of escaping the mindset that the adults had built up inside her?

“Then what about you, Princess?”

Quenser suddenly asked something.

A juvenile side of him may have included a bit of cruelty in the question.

“What do you think is right?”

“Well.”

She paused for a moment, but she did not seem to think too much about it.

She answered in her usual unconcerned manner.

“You make your own decisions on your own responsibility and you kill on your own responsibility. What other answer is there in this world?”

Tomorrow, they would begin a new war somewhere else.

This world justified its actions, but the good were not rewarded and the evil were not punished. Even so, they would continue to struggle and search for what is right.

1. ↑ Malgache (a native language from Madagascar) name of the introduced tropical fruit custard apple, also known as bullock's heart.